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7
The Brilliant Healer's New Life in the Shadows


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“Wait, what?
Battle? H-Hold on!
What?! Wait!”
“Now, onward! To battle!
I’ll show you my mettle,
Lily!”
Rubel
Lily
© Daburyu


Carmilla
“Now, dance!
Well, as long as it
stays dark, that is.”
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Melissa's crimson blade, reflecting the sunlight in a fiery blaze, sent a towering pillar of flames soaring into the sky.
Melissa
© Daburyu
"HAAAAAAAAAAAH!"
Zenos

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Prologue

The Kingdom of Herzeth, known across the continent as the Kingdom of the Sun, bordered four other nations. While it maintained friendly relations with some, with others it coexisted in a tense state of rivalry. One such rival was the Malavaar Empire to the northwest—a rising autocratic state ruled by an emperor. Recently, it had been steadily absorbing neighboring countries as vassal states.

Ignoring its expanding influence was not an option. Both Herzeth and Malavaar had built numerous fortresses along their borders where large military forces had been stationed in a mutual show of intimidation. Skirmishes persisted along the northern front lines, and the situation had long been locked in a stalemate.

But the winds of change were blowing—far from the main battlefield.

One day at dawn, in a border region located below Malavaar's southernmost edge known as the Western Defensive Line, a sentry stretched and yawned.

"Man, I'm sleepy," he mumbled.

The soldier beside him sighed, clearly disapproving of his comrade's attitude. "Hey. Stay alert."

"Huh? Aw, come on. Who cares? We're not on the northern front. This outpost is practically for show."

"I mean, true, but...still!"

Beyond this area lay the Yanul Marshlands, a region teeming with magical beasts. The marshlands were considered too dangerous to be claimed by any nation, and thus the likelihood of enemy forces advancing through them was slim to none. As such, the primary duty of the soldiers stationed here was dealing with stray magical beasts.

"If you keep slacking off, the commander's gonna chew you out," the other soldier cautioned.

"Right, the Flare Maiden or whatever. I hear she was a big shot

over at the northern front. How did she end up in the middle of nowhere like this?”

“How is a grunt like me supposed to know that?”

“Well, anyhow, there’s no way Herzeth is gonna lose the war, long as we’ve got the saintess’s blessing and all. Hey, you got a smoke?”

“Ugh. Just one, all right?” the second soldier muttered with a shrug before pulling a cigarette from his pocket.

As the pair smoked in the light of the new dawn, one of them suddenly furrowed his brow.

“Hm...?”

“What? What is it?”

“That...”

The two soldiers turned their gaze to the distance, where faint wisps of smoke were rising from the sparsely wooded plain. Or was it just morning mist?

“What...is that?”

At the same time, a faint vibration rumbled underfoot. It was like an irregular heartbeat, pulsing unevenly, and seemed to be growing more intense.

One of the soldiers peered through the magical telescope hanging from his neck and told the other in a trembling voice, “Report this to the commander immediately.”

What cloaked the distant sky was not mist—it was dust. And within that dust, countless twisted silhouettes squirmed and writhed.

The soldier stumbled backward, shouting at the top of his lungs, “It’s a beast horde!”

***

“What’s the situation?”

It was evening, and an emergency Council of the Seven was being held in the royal capital. Six of the nation’s most influential nobles were seated around a magnificent, gleaming round table made of marble.

“The report states that approximately two hundred magical beasts, primarily smaller variants, have been sighted,” a military

officer reported in a hurried tone.

A stern-looking man with narrow eyes asked, “Where’s Lord Vamillus?”

“He hasn’t returned from his diplomatic tour yet,” replied a government official standing in the corner of the room, his tone apologetic.

The narrow-eyed man scoffed. “A diplomatic tour? A self-indulgent vacation, more like.”

“Lord Giesz, we must focus on the matter at hand for now,” gently interjected Lord Fennel, who was known to be a moderate. “So, what happened to the two hundred beasts?”

“Under the guidance of their commander, the soldiers managed to drive back the magical beasts by evening,” the military officer replied. “However, because the Western Defensive Line is sparsely manned, the damage was significant. Furthermore, a new wave attacked the following day. The soldiers stationed at the fortress are being pushed to their limits day and night.”

Lord Fennel hummed, stroking his beard thoughtfully. “So the Flare Maiden managed to hold the line. Truly she is a capable woman. Still, we must act swiftly.”

It was no surprise that magical beasts had emerged from the Yanul Marshlands. The area, located near the border between Herzeth and southern Malavaar, was a known breeding ground for such creatures. Still, something felt off.

“Does this sort of thing happen often?” Lord Fennel asked.

“No, my lord. Stray beasts occasionally wander into our territory, but they’re usually alone or in small groups at most. A group of this size is unprecedented.”

“Do we know the cause?”

“We’re still investigating.”

“Let us hope this is an isolated incident, then.”

“I would caution against blithe optimism, Lord Fennel,” said Albert Baycladd, the handsome young man who was heir to the prestigious House Baycladd, foremost of the seven great noble houses. As he uncrossed his long legs, his sharp gaze swept over the room. “Rot could strike from anywhere, at any time.”

“Rot,” Lord Fennel echoed. “Are you referring to the saintess’s prophecy?”

The month prior, a prophetic warning of “most severe rot” looming over the horizon had been delivered to the Council of the Seven. In the past, prophecies regarding severe rot had foretold devastating pandemics and natural disasters. “Most” severe rot went beyond that and had the potential to threaten the very survival of the nation.

After the initial prophecy, a catastrophe-level S Rank magical beast had appeared in the Zagras region. The beast, thought to be the source of the prophesied threat, had been defeated by a Black Class adventurer known as the Sword Saint. Yet the ominous star that heralded incoming calamity still shone eerily in the sky.

“Could this unyielding evil star represent the Malavaar Empire?” asked one of the nobles at the table in a grave tone.

The Malavaar Empire’s influence was expanding rapidly, and pressure along the northern front grew with each passing day. Still, the magical beasts had emerged away from the empire’s southernmost border, making it difficult to draw any definitive conclusions.

“We cannot say for certain. Without solid evidence, pointing fingers would be reckless. A poorly thought out accusation could stoke the flames of a much larger conflict.” Silence briefly fell upon the room. Albert’s sharp gaze turned to Lord Giesz, whose narrow eyes and features were reminiscent of those of a cunning bird. “What would you propose we do, Lord Giesz?”

Lord Giesz crossed his arms, his expression remaining the same as he spoke. “I have already arranged for reinforcements.”

“Acting promptly as always. Commendable,” Albert replied. “But allocating military strength takes a careful hand under the current circumstances.”

“Hmph. You don’t need to tell me that,” Lord Giesz scoffed, his brows furrowing slightly.

The northern front lines were the most volatile point between Herzeth and Malavaar, locked in a precarious standoff. With both main forces entrenched there, glaring at each other, diverting troops

to another battlefield was a risky gamble indeed.

"The main forces stationed on the northern front cannot be moved," Lord Giesz said. "Reinforcements will be dispatched from the royal capital."

"You're sending out the capital's defense forces?" Albert asked. "Will they be able to handle such an unexpected crisis?"

"That's why we'll be reinforcing our shields."

"Shields?"

"The poor," Lord Giesz said flatly, as though stating the obvious.

It was common knowledge that a significant number of poor folk were being sent to guard various frontiers, paid in meager meals and pittances for wages. One of their primary roles on the front lines was to act as a buffer during enemy attacks.

"Ah. The poor," Albert echoed.

"Yes. If nothing else, they must serve as shields. That's the only reason we allow those vermin to live in the shadows of the royal capital in the first place."

"Vermin, you say..."

"Am I wrong?"

"No." Albert smiled faintly, resting a hand against his cheek. "I expect great things."

"My army will deliver results regardless of your expectations," Lord Giesz retorted with a frown.

"*Your* army, is it?"

"Do you object? Military affairs are under my jurisdiction presently."

Each of the seven great noble houses oversaw different aspects of the kingdom, politics, the military, diplomacy, and trade among them. To prevent the concentration of power, these responsibilities were rotated every few years. Currently, House Giesz held control over the kingdom's military forces.

"Ah, no, I have no objections. My expectations lie elsewhere," Albert muttered softly, his smile remaining unchanged as he gazed out the window at the clear blue sky.

Chapter One: Conscription Commotion

"All right, everyone! Are you ready?" the elf girl Lily asked.

"Yes, Miss Lily!"

"Always!"

"I'm so excited!"

After the children's energetic replies, Lily continued, "Okay, we have three rules! One, let's all behave. Two, we can't ru— Hey! Oh, they're already running!"

Lily clutched her head in exasperation as she watched the children scatter at full speed in every direction.

They were at the black market on the outskirts of the slums—a chaotic trading hub vital to the residents of the area. Food, daily necessities, clothing, entertainment goods, and everything in between, from simple junk to hidden treasures, could be found here. As for the children, they were students from St. Carmilla Academy, a school built for the poor, on a field trip meant to put their arithmetic lessons into practice through shopping.

"I can't even finish saying the rules... They don't respect my authority at all..." Lily muttered dejectedly.

"Well, it's a good thing for kids to have that much energy. My mentor used to say that a place full of bright kids is a good place indeed," said Zenos, a shadow healer and one of the founders of the school.

Since the other teacher—Zonde, a lizardman—was absent, Zenos had closed his clandestine clinic for the morning to accompany Lily and the children. It was late summer, and the harsh sunlight had softened somewhat. Zenos's well-worn pitch-black cloak fluttered in the breeze as usual.

Lily sighed and looked up at him. "Were you like that when you

were little, Zenos?"

"During my time with my mentor, probably, yeah," he replied.

"And the rest of the time?"

"Back in the orphanage, if we ever said anything other than 'yes, sir' or 'yes, ma'am,' we'd get a lashing or a smacking. Everyone was silent as the grave."

"That...doesn't sound healthy at all," Lily remarked before turning her attention back to the children running around the market. "Does everyone remember what they need to buy? It's stationery and snacks! Don't forget to calculate your change!"

A chorus of cheerful cries of "Yes, Miss Lily!" echoed from all over.

"Your story made me realize kids don't always have to follow the rules perfectly," Lily said. "I'm teaching them right!"

"Yeah," Zenos agreed. He scratched his head as he watched the children, now split into small groups, merrily browsing the various goods. "But you know, I feel bad for *you*, Lily."

"Huh? How come?" Lily tilted her head in confusion.

Zenos gave her a small smile. "I mean, don't you want to play and have fun with kids your age? Instead, here you are, acting as their teacher on my request."

Lily worked as both a receptionist and nurse at Zenos's clinic as well as a teacher alongside Zonde at St. Carmilla. The bright young elf had gotten basic education from Ilya, a student at the aristocratic Ledelucia Academy—and she'd learned quickly. Since Zenos was often busy with the clinic, he couldn't always be present at the school, so Lily had been the perfect fit for the teaching role.

"And as their teacher, you can't really play with them as peers, huh?" Zenos asked. His own childhood had been horribly harsh, but he'd at least had the other orphans. Now that he thought about it, Lily didn't have that kind of companionship.

"Hmm." Lily paused for a moment, bringing a finger to her chin in thought, before smiling brightly. "Well, having friends my age would probably be fun, but just being with you and everyone else makes me really happy already! I'm content, really!"

"Yeah?" Zenos smiled and nodded. "Well, I'm grateful for you."

Last month, he'd been pulled into an unexpected adventure in the

remote region of Zagras. During his absence, Lily and the leaders of the demi-human clans had done a great job of keeping things running.

Lily stretched happily, her face beaming with pride. "Hee hee! Feel free to shower me with head pats!"

"I feel like I did that already when I came back."

"Yeah, but I deserve constant head pats, you know."

"Really, now? All right. Fair." He gently patted her head.

Lily's expression softened into a content smile. "Eh heh heh!"

"Hey! Miss Lily is getting head pats from Dr. Zenos!"

"No fair! I want some too!"

"Me too!"

As the children began gathering around, Lily turned to them with a stern expression. "Nuh-uh! Zenos's head pats are just for me!"

"And now she sounds authoritarian all of a sudden," Zenos muttered.

The lively outdoor class soon came to an end, and the group began their journey back.

"Shopping was so much fun!" a child remarked.

"Yes, but remember, this was meant to be a learning experience," Lily pointed out. "Did everyone do their calculations right?"

"Yes, Miss Lily!" the children replied energetically.

Lily watched them with a smile for a moment before suddenly exclaiming, "Oh no!"

"What's the matter, Lily?" Zenos asked.

"I totally forgot! I have some shopping to do too! We need groceries for dinner tonight!"

"Should we all head back to the market?"

"No, no, it'll be total chaos if we bring the children. Zenos, can you take everyone back for now? I'll just run right over and grab what I need."

"All right. Be careful."

"Don't worry! I'll be quick. See you soon!" Lily waved at Zenos, then dashed off into the market.

He watched her small figure disappear around a corner before turning and leading the children back along the road to the school in

the slums.

A girl tugged on Zenos's sleeve. "Um, doctor? I liked shopping, but what I really liked was that lesson with the map."

"The map?" he echoed. "Oh, you mean geography?"

"The world's so big! I had no idea."

"It really is..."

Many in the slums spent their entire lives without ever getting the chance to see anything beyond their immediate surroundings. Had Zenos not met his mentor or chanced into an adventuring party, he might've thought that cramped, cold orphanage was all there was.

"There's stuff outside the slums and even further away, like other countries. It kinda made my head spin..."

"I wanna visit all the countries!"

"Me too!"

As the children chatted excitedly, another student spoke up. "But we can only go to friendly countries, right? There was this one country, um, the Malu... Mala..."

"The Malavaar Empire," Zenos said as they walked.

Herzeth bordered four other countries, but tensions were particularly high with the Malavaar Empire to the northwest, with frequent skirmishes along the border.

"Doctor, what kinda place is the Malavaar Empire?"

"I've never been," Zenos explained, "so I don't actually know."

"Wow! There's stuff you don't know?"

"Oh, yeah. There's lots of stuff I don't know."

The student hummed pensively. "I think the countries should stop fighting."

"There are probably complicated reasons why they can't stop."

"How come?" the girl asked, tilting her head in innocent puzzlement. "Can't they just apologize? Being friends is a lot more fun than being enemies!"

"You're absolutely right," Zenos conceded.

People of the slums were of various races. Not long ago, the area had been plagued by violent and bloody conflicts between the different demographics, but now these diverse children walked side by side, hand in hand. Generations changed, and ushered with them

new eras. The future would always be built by children—and the fact they had begun to take an interest in the outside world could only be a good sign.

Currently, the children attended class about once a week. However, Zenos wanted to increase the frequency of their lessons as they grew used to studying—though whether he could would depend on whether it was possible for him to balance that with his workload at the clinic.

As they continued walking through the slums, they came across a crowd gathering at the end of the street.

"What's going on?" Zenos asked, approaching the commotion.

People were gathered around a wooden notice board. Written on it in bold red letters were the words: "Mass Recruitment of Border Patrol Officers." Below it, additional information stated that the work was paid and that meals would be provided thrice daily, along with the time and location for applicants to assemble.

"Border patrol officers?" a child said. "Doctor, what does that mean?"

The children had become fairly skilled at reading already, but still struggled to grasp the meaning behind the words.

"They're recruiting soldiers to help protect the country," Zenos explained.

"Wow! Really? That sounds kinda cool!"

"You even get food and money!"

"That's awesome! Hey, can we join too?"

A girl stepped between the excited boys, her expression stern. "It's not cool at all! My dad left for something like this, and...he never came back..."

"What?"

The boys fell silent, their earlier excitement replaced by wide-eyed disbelief.

"Protecting the country means facing danger when an enemy arrives," Zenos explained softly, his gaze fixed on the sign. "It's not as simple as it sounds."

The children remained mute, exchanging uneasy glances.

"Still, something's bugging me..."

Zenos knew that this type of recruitment drive happened occasionally, and that some of the poor, urged by hunger, would volunteer as border guards. But something about this felt off. A "mass" recruitment was unusual. Had something happened?

"Listen up, you filthy slum rats!" came a booming voice from down the street.

Turning toward the source, Zenos and the children saw a middle-aged man holding a magical loudspeaker. The man, who was quite stout and broad, haughtily glared down at the residents of the slums. He wore golden armor bearing the symbol of a burning sun—most likely a military emblem of some sort. Behind him stood about fifty armed soldiers, standing in formation.

"I am Higarth, a senior officer of the military. You lot probably can't even read the sign correctly, so I came here myself to explain it to you. Our kingdom is in need of new guards at the border. You are to volunteer immediately. Am I clear, you useless dimwits?" After delivering his condescending speech, he muttered under his breath, "Why do *I* have to come to this filthy place?"

A subordinate standing behind him leaned in and whispered, "General, sir. This is a direct request from Lord Giesz of the seven great noble houses. He believed your presence would improve morale..."

Higarth scoffed. "Hmph. I suppose I cannot refuse a request from Lord Giesz himself."

"The more shields the better, sir."

"I *know* that."

Thanks to an auditory enhancement spell, Zenos managed to catch snippets of the hushed exchange. *Shields?* he thought to himself, furrowing his brows.

Puffing out his chest, Higarth lifted the magical loudspeaker to his mouth once more. When he spoke next, it was with an overwhelming aura of superiority. "I am a general of this kingdom, yet here I am, having personally come to this filthy dump. Normally, lowly mongrels like you would never even lay eyes upon someone of such an esteemed rank. Be grateful. Now, rats, line up and enlist!"

Most of the slum residents, however, simply glanced at him as

though he were an annoyance and walked away, not paying him much mind. In the area around Zenos's clinic especially, new industries had begun to sprout, and it was likely there were now fewer people desperate enough to risk their lives just to ensure tomorrow's meal.

"Hey! Are you listening?! Can you scum not even understand simple words?!" Frustrated, Higarth wiped the sweat off his greasy forehead and glared sharply at the children. "You there! Brats! I shall grant you the honor of guarding our borders! Come here!"

"General, they're just children," the soldier pointed out.

"It doesn't matter," Higarth retorted. "A shield is a shield."

The men motioned for the children to approach, but the students, scared stiff, remained frozen in place.

Higarth let out an exaggerated snort of disdain. "Ugh, how droll. Seize them and bring them along."

"Yes, sir."

The soldiers behind him began to advance in unison, making the children yelp with fear.

"Hey. Hold up a second," said the shadow healer in his flowing black cloak as he stepped in front of the pale-faced children. "Why are you strong-arming a bunch of kids?"

"And who are *you* supposed to be?" Higarth asked, furrowing his brows as he stepped closer.

"I'm their guardian. I can't let you do whatever you please."

"Step aside. That's an order."

"I don't work for you, so I don't have to listen to a word you say."

"What was that? A filthy rat dares talk back to *me*? You insolent fool!" Higarth snarled. He drew his sword and slashed without hesitation.

A sharp metallic *clang* rang out, and the general smirked—only for Zenos to calmly lower his right arm, which he'd lifted to guard himself.

"Are all soldiers this bad at listening to reason?"

"What? How are you unscathed? I *know* I struck you!"

Zenos felt no need to explain that he'd used protective magic—after all, Higarth didn't seem willing to entertain the words of a poor

slum dweller. It had been a while since Zenos had last encountered such a blatant bigot, but perhaps this was simply the norm in Herzeth?

"Anyway, we'll be going now. Come on, guys."

"Okay!" the children replied in unison.

"Stop right there!" Higarth demanded, furious.

Enhance Skill.

A blue light enveloped Zenos's hand as he thrust his fist toward Higarth's face.

"Eek!" the general yelped, flinching as he squeezed his eyes shut.

"Sir!" the soldiers shouted in alarm.

But the punch stopped just short of Higarth's nose. Zenos slowly opened his fingers, revealing a tiny beetle on his palm; its back bore a skull-like pattern.

"This is a purple skull beetle," Zenos explained. "If someone with no tolerance gets stung, they'll suffer unbearable itching and pain for a whole day. It almost got you."

"Y-You little—"

"You should be thanking me, actually."

"Doc!" came a sharp voice.

Zenos looked around to find a large crowd surrounding the agitated Higarth. It was made up of lizardmen, werewolves, and orcs, the three dominant species of the slums. At the forefront of each group—all well over a hundred fierce men and women strong—stood their respective leaders, glaring menacingly at the soldiers: Zophia, Lynga, and Loewe.

"Wh-Who are you people?!" the general demanded.

"Who are we?" Lynga echoed nonchalantly, a small smirk on her lips. "Oh, just a group of people out for a stroll."

"N-Nonsense! You cannot expect me to believe this intimidating crowd is out for a stroll!"

"Ah, what can I say?" Loewe said with a grin. "We're all just really good pals here."

The demi-humans' oppressive aura forced the soldiers to take a step back.


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“This is no place for a fancy official like you. Why are you here? Looking to catch some deadly disease, maybe?” Zophia asked sharply.

“Wh-What?!” Higarth flinched and glanced at his subordinates before clearing his throat. “I-I seem to recall I have some urgent business to attend to, but mark my words! You’ll pay for this!”

With that, Higarth huffed and puffed as he wiped the sweat from his forehead and marched off with his troops, disappearing down the street.

Zophia quickly approached Zenos. “You good, doc? I heard there might be trouble, so I hurried on over with my guys.”

“Yeah, I’m fine. Thanks for coming over, especially since the kids are here too.” Zenos turned his gaze to the recruitment notice. “Why would military officers personally come over to draft residents of the slums, though?”

And the fact that Higarth—a general, no less—had blatantly attempted to conscript young children indicated something was definitely going on.

“Lynga caught wind of something happening near the western border,” Zophia said warily.

“The western border...”

Lynga’s underground casino attracted people from all walks of life, who brought with them all kinds of information. This made it a prime spot for gleaning the latest rumors, including those about national affairs.

“So that’s why they want more troops,” Zenos mused.

What was nagging at the back of his mind, however, was the way Higarth had used the word “shield.” This was being framed as border patrol recruitment, but it was unlikely that the poor would truly be enlisted as proper soldiers.

Zenos cast a quiet, concerned glance down the road leading back toward the black market before turning back to Zophia and the others. “Can you guys look after the kids? I’m gonna go find Lily.”

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Meanwhile, at the market, Lily was busy buying vegetables for the night's dinner: red yams, blue carrots, and yellow cabbage. Their shapes were irregular, but they brimmed with freshness.

"Thanks as always, Lily," the shopkeeper said. "Our veggies may look a bit rough, but I promise they taste amazin'."

"Oh, I know! The veggies here are always super sweet."

The shopkeeper let out a bright laugh and slipped a ripe, brilliantly red apple into Lily's bag. "Smart shopper! Here, a little gift for you."

"Wow! Thank you!"

"Dr. Zenos is real good to us. Tell him I said hi, yeah?"

"Sure! I'll let him know!"

Beaming, Lily turned on her heel, shopping bag in hand, and started heading back. That was when she noticed someone loitering in one of the market's alleys. A child—but one with a distinctly different aura from the other kids in the slums.

So pretty, she thought. But judging by the shirt, trousers, and the sword strapped at his waist, the child seemed to be a boy. With soft, wavy dark-gray hair, long lashes, and refined, picture-perfect features, the boy had an air of elegance that was unusual around here. His eyes, dark like black quartz, darted from side to side as he aimlessly wandered down the narrow path.

"Hey," Lily called out, approaching the boy.

"Huh?" He turned to face her, his expression unchanged. It was hard to be certain, but he seemed to be around Lily's age, albeit slightly taller than her. In contrast with his refined appearance, his tone was blunt. "Do you need something from me?"

Lily's gaze shifted to his right hand. "Um, you might want to hide that bracelet."

"Why?"

"Well, it looks really expensive..."


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The bracelet wrapped around the boy's right wrist gleamed a golden hue and was adorned with beautiful stones that looked like precious gems. While the area had definitely grown safer since the establishment of Zenos's clinic and the end of the conflict among the three demi-human factions, a lone child wearing such an expensive accessory was still undeniably in danger.

But the boy seemed unfazed by Lily's concern. "Hmph. And why should I listen to a word you say?"

"Um...are you by yourself? Where are your parents?"

"My parents don't care about me."

"Do you have friends with you?"

"I don't have any friends at all."

"Oh..." *What should I do?*

Judging by the boy's appearance, he didn't seem to be from the slums. Letting him wander around the market all by himself was a terrible idea.

"Where do you live? I can walk you home," Lily offered.

"I'm not going back home," he retorted.

"Huh?" A runaway kid, then. That was certainly a problem. With no better options, Lily decided to take him to the clinic. "Do you want to come to my home?"

"Why would I?"

"Well, I don't really have many friends my age either. We could hang out!"

The boy fell silent for a moment, his eyes widening slightly. "Huh. You want to be my friend?"

"Y-Yeah! Let's be friends."

For a brief moment, the boy's expression softened into something that almost looked like happiness, but he quickly turned away with an exaggerated air of indifference. "I *guess* that's fine. What's your name?"

"Lily. And yours?"

"Rubel," he muttered quietly before turning and starting toward the market's exit.

Lily gasped. Outside the area with the various stalls and tents was a large group of armored soldiers standing at attention. "Wait,

Rubel!”

Sensing the tense atmosphere, Lily instinctively stepped in front of Rubel. However, the rugged officer at the front of the group looked past her and gave Rubel a worried frown.

“Young master, please refrain from recklessly browsing the black market alone. And asking us not to follow, claiming we’re in the way? Please! This is the slums. It’s dangerous here. What if something were to happen to you?”

Rubel huffed. “I’m not scared. Are you trying to give *me* orders?”

“N-No, that’s not what I meant...”

“You all just shut up and take me where I want to go.”

Lily’s eyes darted around in confusion. “Huh?”

Rubel was speaking to the men in far too arrogant a tone for a child addressing adults—especially soldiers.

One of the guards turned his gaze toward Lily. “Is that an elf? Who is she?”

“She’s my friend,” Rubel replied. “Got a problem with that?”

“Your...friend, young master?”

“What? Am I not allowed to have friends?”

“O-Of course you are, it’s just...”

Ignoring the soldier’s stammers, Rubel grabbed Lily’s arm. “All right. We’re going. Lily, with me.”

“Huh?”

Lily had meant to take Rubel to the clinic, but the boy was now confidently striding toward a carriage parked around a corner. It was made of polished black metal and had a robust, reinforced design. On its side was emblazoned a blazing sun—a military insignia.

“Um, Rubel, I really need to get back...” Lily said.

“You’re my friend, no?” He turned to the soldiers. “We’re bringing Lily. I trust you have no complaints?”

“No, my lord.” The soldiers exchanged bewildered glances, but realized there was no use arguing. They picked up the startled Lily and put her inside the carriage.

Rubel sat next to her and triumphantly raised his right hand toward the ceiling. “Now, onward! To battle! I’ll show you my mettle, Lily!”

“Wait, what? Battle? H-Hold on! What?! Wait!”

Some passersby noticed the commotion and approached with concerned expressions, but before anyone could intervene, the carriage door slammed shut. With the sharp neighs of horses, the carriage surged forward, speeding away down the street.

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Zenos dashed through the alleyways of the slums and rounded a corner, where he ran into Zophia’s younger brother, the lizardman Zonde.

“Doc!”

“Hey, Zonde.”

“Doc, I was heading to the clinic, because oh man, it’s bad,” Zonde blurted out, visibly flustered and panting heavily. “It... It looks like someone took Lily.”

“What?!”

The faint sense of dread that had been gnawing at Zenos had turned out to be prophetic. Lily was a frequent visitor to the black market and well-known in the area, and often went shopping on her own when Zenos was busy with house calls or treatments. He’d never been particularly worried about her safety—until today.

“Who took her? The military?” he guessed.

“Sounds like it, yeah,” Zonde confirmed. “Some people saw her being forced into a carriage. They tried to run after it, but couldn’t catch up.”

The lizardman went on to explain that he’d been heading to the school after finishing an errand when a frantic passerby had shared the story with him.

“Damn it,” Zenos muttered, pressing a hand to his forehead.

Some military bigshot named Higarth had been trying to draft children into the army to serve as border patrol officers. If the government was that desperate for troops, it wasn’t surprising that even a young girl like Lily would be targeted. Zenos had been planning on fetching her out of concern, but it seemed he was too late.

"But," Zonde added, "they also mentioned she was with a child in fancy clothes."

"Fancy clothes?"

"Yeah. And apparently it looked like that kid was the one taking Lily away."

A well-dressed child wouldn't have come from the slums. Another kidnapping victim, perhaps? Or was there an angle to this that he wasn't seeing? Zenos thought for a moment, but ultimately drew a blank. For now, he decided to rush back to the clinic with Zonde.

***

When Zenos explained what had happened, Carmilla exploded with indignation.

"What?! Utter incompetence! You know I cannot leave the clinic during the day, Zenos! *You* should have kept an eye on her! What if something happens to Lily?!"

"Sorry," Zenos replied.

"It's not really the doc's fault," Zophia interjected. "It's those military scum that did this."

Carmilla looked unconvinced as she paced restlessly around the clinic, clearly agitated. "This is unacceptable! How *dare* they rob me of Lily's divine cooking!"

Zenos stood up, gave the wraith a determined look, and said, "I can't accept this either. I'm bringing Lily back, no matter what."

Carmilla stopped mid-step with a scoff. "Hmph."

The situation was dire, but the course of action was clear.

Lynga, who had been nervously loitering in the treatment room, spoke up with an anxious tone. "I mean, okay, but...where do you think she is?"

"If the military took her, then it was likely to the front lines," Zenos ventured.

Loewe crossed her arms. "That's even worse, then. Normal people can't approach war zones that easily. The roads are probably restricted to anyone not military too."

"Yeah, but there's one way to bypass that," Zenos said, letting out

a sigh before glancing around at everyone else. “Join the military.”

“Wait, you mean...”

Zenos turned his gaze to the window. “I’ll apply to become a border patrol officer.”

***

In the innermost part of the special nobles’ district, closer to the royal palace than any other, was the Baycladd family estate. The expansive manor resembled a labyrinth, its winding corridors reminiscent of a spider’s web. In one corner of this maze, an elderly butler with perfect posture called out to the noble house’s heir.

“One moment, Lord Albert.”

“Yes?” Albert asked, turning around.

The butler approached him briskly. “Regarding the matter of the Western Defensive Line...”

“Ah, I’ve heard. The royal capital’s defense forces will be sending reinforcements. Though, as I understand it, the personnel selection leaves much to be desired. Lord Giesz has a tendency to favor flattery over skill.”

“One never knows where there might be ears listening. It would be best to refrain from making such remarks flippantly.”

“Heh. Fair enough. By the way, has there been any progress made in uncovering the cause of the magical beast attacks?”

“No, my lord. The investigation is still ongoing. But another issue has arisen...” The butler stepped closer, glanced around cautiously, and spoke in a low voice. “It seems Lord Rubel has gone to the battlefield in question.”

“I beg your pardon?” Albert’s eyes narrowed. “Is that reliable information?”

“We are working to confirm this as soon as possible, but yes, it seems to be the case. We have received a report that he forced his way into one of the squads dispatched for the Western Defensive Line.”

“That boy,” Albert muttered. He brought the butler into a nearby room and closed the door before continuing, “I’d like to demand that

he be brought back immediately, but this is a complicated matter."

"Indeed. Lord Giesz is unlikely to easily relinquish him," the butler agreed with a grave nod.

While the kingdom's military was technically under the crown's jurisdiction, in practice, the authority was delegated to the seven great noble houses, which managed it on a rotating basis. Currently, that duty fell to House Giesz, which meant that Lord Giesz was the de facto military leader. House Giesz often stood in opposition to House Baycladd's leadership. It was likely they were already aware of Rubel's presence within the army, and it was hard to imagine they would willingly release the boy from their custody.

"Are the reinforcements already on their way to the Western Defensive Line?" Albert asked.

"I hear they first plan on stopping by the slums to recruit additional soldiers for border patrol."

"The slums. Of course," Albert murmured, bringing a finger to his chin before glancing at the butler. "Can you ready a magical carriage for me? Immediately."

"Of course, Lord Albert. Will you be going personally?"

"The situation demands it. Rubel won't listen to anyone else."

"Understood. I'll make the necessary arrangements at once." The butler bowed sharply and left.

Albert sighed and rubbed his forehead with his fingertips. "My fool of a brother..."

***

"Go forth, everyone! Chaaarge!"

"Can you give it a rest? You're being weird," Zenos muttered, glaring at the pack slung over his shoulder. Inside it, as usual, was Carmilla—hidden within the bracelet.

The registration process to become a border patrol officer was being conducted in a part of the ruined city between the slums and the capital's residential areas, meaning it was relatively close to Zenos's clinic. A makeshift tent had been set up there, and a line of slum residents, enticed by the promise of a meager wage and three

meals a day, had already formed. Despite the suspicious nature of the recruitment drive, a fair number of people had nevertheless shown up. It wasn't too surprising; many in the slums were still struggling to secure their next meal.

"There are more people than I expected," Carmilla remarked.

"There sure are," Zenos agreed. He scanned the crowd, but didn't spot anyone familiar. It seemed most of the applicants were from parts of the slums further away from those he frequented. "By the way," he said to the wraith in his bag, "are you okay with leaving again so soon?"

Just last month, they'd taken part in the expedition to the Zagras region. Zenos had been quite busy for the past little while, what with teaching at an academy for nobles, venturing to a remote region to subdue magical beasts, and more. He'd hoped to take it easy at the clinic for a while, yet now here he was, headed for a battlefield.

"Naturally!" Carmilla exclaimed. "This is an urgent matter, and one involving Lily besides. What manner of wretch would I be to stay behind and rest on my laurels?"

"You know, you've changed a lot since we first met..."

"Nonsense! I have always been a pillar of compassion. Why, compassion is synonymous with my very being!"

"Some undead you are."

Zophia and the others had also insisted on signing up to help rescue Lily, but Zenos had managed to convince them that was a bad idea. If all three leaders of the major demi-human factions disappeared from the slums, it could leave the area vulnerable. Moreover, if Lily happened to return, she'd find no one there, which would end up creating another issue.

"We're counting on you to get her back, doc," Zophia had finally said.

"I'll bring her home," Zenos had promised in return.

"Without Lily, who am I going to vent to?" Lynga had lamented. "She needs to come back!"

"Why were you venting to a little girl?" Zenos had asked incredulously.

"I can't nap unless Lily pats me on the head and tells me I'm a

good girl," Loewe had cut in.

"You *do* know she's not your mother, right?" Zenos had grumbled.

As Zenos recalled these interactions, Carmilla's voice drifted from the bag. "Do you have any idea where Lily might have gone?"

"Likely somewhere near the border, if the military is involved," Zenos said.

Unfortunately, the country's borders were vast, stretching over a wide area. Lynga had mentioned something going on at the western border, but there was no guarantee Zenos would be sent to wherever Lily had been taken.

"Well, that is a problem, no?" Carmilla pointed out. "Do you have a plan?"

"I have a certain clue," Zenos replied.

He was referring to what Zonde had heard from a passerby: Lily had been with a well-dressed child. He went on to explain that, if that account was true, the child likely wasn't from the slums. And with the military being involved, it was also unlikely the child was an ordinary citizen. They might be the son or daughter of a high-ranking officer, or even someone of more illustrious standing.

"How is that relevant?" the wraith pressed.

"Well, I don't know why a kid like that would be with the military, but they wouldn't throw a highborn child onto the battlefield like that. So they're probably headed somewhere safer, like near the western border's command center."

"So, since Lily is with said child, that is likely true for her as well."

"That's the hope."

For now, the goal was to head to the region where the command center was located.

As registered applicants were directed to board nearby wagons, Zenos's turn to register finally came. A young soldier with a cold, judgmental gaze asked for his name, then began to inquire about his identity and physical condition in a monotone voice. The soldier didn't bother asking about his aspirations or skills—all that mattered was whether Zenos's body could function.

Unsurprisingly, what the military wanted from the poor was not their prowess as soldiers. The arrogant man from earlier who'd

made this clear, Higarth, was nowhere to be seen. Zenos figured he'd already left for the battlefield.

The shadow healer approached an expressionless soldier at the tent's reception and asked, "Hey, got a second?"

"Shut your mouth and get in the wagon."

"I'd like to be assigned to an area near the command center."

"What?" the soldier asked, his blank expression twisting into a scowl. "You've got some nerve to make demands, rat!"

"Look—"

"Of course," came a voice from inside Zenos's bag. "I'll pay."

"Huh?"

"How much do you want? A hundred thousand wen? Two hundred thousand? I can slip it to you, no problem. All you need to do is assign me to a wagon headed for the command center. Simple, right?"

"Floaty snake..." Zenos hissed into his pack.

Carmilla, imitating his voice, was trying to bribe the soldier. While her imitation wasn't perfect, it was noisy enough around them that the soldier didn't seem to notice.

"You... What?" the soldier stammered. He hesitated for a moment, his eyes darting side to side. Then, as though realization had hit him, he raised his voice and said, "Don't lie to me! There's no way a slum rat has that kind of money!"

"I do, though."

"Whaaat?!"

"Stop running your mouth!" Zenos whispered. He hadn't brought much money this time, as it wouldn't be of much use on the battlefield.

But Carmilla chuckled smugly. "Check your bag, Zenos."

"Huh?" As directed, he rummaged through the bag and, indeed, found a wad of cash stuffed deep inside. "Why is this here...?"

"Aha ha ha! I hid it there in case of precisely such an emergency!"

"Well played."

"Of course! I am renowned all across the land as a master of bribery!"

"Really? A master of bribery?"

"No."

"No?!"

Was this a good idea? Zenos wasn't sure what to think anymore. Also, what even was a "master of bribery"? Things just kept getting more and more absurd. Still, this was a small price to pay to get Lily back.

Just as he reached for the money, however, a booming voice rang out nearby. "You there! Stop holding up the line! Move it along!"

"Huh? Oh! My apologies, sir!" the man at the reception area said, springing to attention and giving a hasty salute to the higher-ranking soldier. He then waved Zenos away dismissively. "Go on! Move!"

"But my assignment—"

"Don't talk back, trash. Move!"

This was a problem. The arrival of a superior officer had made going down the bribe route near impossible, and Zenos had no way of knowing which of the many wagons was headed for the command center. At this rate, he'd have to head to some random border outpost first, then figure out how to find the command center and travel to it. It would inevitably waste a lot of time.

As he stood there, unsure of what to do, a commotion suddenly erupted in the reception tent.

What's happening?

He followed everyone's gaze to a four-wheeled black vehicle approaching from the far end of the street. It was a magical vehicle —an incredibly expensive means of transportation. Zenos had ridden in one once, during his infiltration of the Royal Institute of Healing.

Sunlight glinted off the vehicle's sleek, luxurious form as it slowed to a stop beside the shabby makeshift tent. Under the watchful eyes of the crowd, an incredibly refined elderly man stepped out of the driver's seat. He moved with deliberate care to open the rear door, then bowed respectfully. From within emerged a strikingly handsome young man with a noble air. His attire was made from fabric so fine that even a lifetime of labor in the slums wouldn't be enough to afford it. His dark gray hair swayed gently in the breeze as his cool, sharp eyes swept over the area.

"Wh-What the?"

"Who's this guy?"

The residents of the slums in line and the soldiers at the registration desks furrowed their brows in confusion.

Suddenly, the commanding officer let out a shocked, "Wh-Whaaat?!"

"Huh? What's the matter? Who is he, sir?" asked one of the soldiers at a desk.

The officer smacked the soldier's head hard and yelled, "Moron! Don't you see that crest?! That's a member of House Baycladd, one of the seven great noble houses!"

"Wh-What?!"

"Show respect, fools! Bow! Now!"

"S-Sir, yes, sir!" the soldiers shouted in unison, scrambling to their knees. They bowed low while the people in line stood frozen, bewildered.

"Hey, rats! What are you standing around for? Bow!"

"Ah, it's fine," the young noble said casually, interrupting the officer's shouts. "I'll only be here for a moment." He leaned toward the elderly butler who had accompanied him and whispered, "Rubel doesn't seem to be here."

"Indeed," the butler replied. "We appear to have arrived too late. What shall we do?"

"Let me think..." The young man touched his cheek thoughtfully and gazed at the makeshift tent. Then, as though having noticed something, he smiled and began walking forward.

"Um, Lord Baycladd?" the officer stammered nervously. "What brings someone as illustrious as you to a filthy place like this?"

"I'd like to have a little chat," the nobleman replied with a friendly smile. "Would that be acceptable?"

"Y-Yes, of course! I would be glad to be of service!" the officer replied, standing proudly as he cast smug glances at his subordinates.

"Oh, no, not with you," the noble replied with a small shake of his head. "I wish to speak to *him*."

"Huh?"

The nobleman's pale finger was pointed directly at a lone man wearing a black cloak.

Zenos placed his hands on his hips with a sigh. "Albert Baycladd. To what do we owe the honor?"

"You dare address a noble of his stature without the proper title?!" the officer bellowed.

Albert interjected, silencing the man with a calm tone. "I'm glad you remember me, Zenos."

"Wh-What?!" The officer's face alternately paled and flushed as he looked back and forth between the two men.

"I had a feeling I might run into you here," Albert continued. "It's as though fate keeps bringing us together."

"Not that I'm thrilled about it," Zenos muttered.

"You insolent little—" the officer sputtered, but Albert and Zenos ignored him.

"I happen to be in a spot of trouble, actually. Would you hear me out?" Albert asked.

"See, I'd say no, but I happen to have a problem, myself," Zenos replied.

"Y-You, you—" The officer kept trying to interject, but found no opening.

"Ah. See? Fate," Albert said. Upon noticing all eyes were on them, he gestured toward his magical vehicle. "Shall we speak inside?"

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The interior of the magical vehicle was far more spacious than it appeared from the outside, designed for passengers to stretch out comfortably. The air was cool and pleasant—likely due to ice-aspected manastones.

"Feels nice in here," Zenos remarked.

"You don't sound surprised," Albert noted. "Most first-timers in a magical vehicle can't hide their excitement."

"I've been in one before."

"I thought you were poor? What a curious man you are." Albert gave a small smile. "So, what I wanted to talk about is my younger

brother. He appears to have headed for the border."

"Your brother?"

"Correct. The third son of House Baycladd, Rubel Baycladd."

"Lord Albert," the butler—who was currently in the driver's seat—interjected cautiously. "Is sharing that much with him truly necessary?"

Remaining seated with his legs crossed, Albert nodded. "This is an important matter. Keeping secrets would serve no purpose."

"Says the guy who always keeps the important bits to himself," Zenos said.

"Do I do that?" Albert asked with a small smile.

Zenos sighed. "So, what's this about your brother going to the border? I don't figure the sons of great noble houses become border guards very often."

"They do not, indeed. I suspect he forced his way into the convoy. He's always been a handful."

"Just go get him, then."

"Sadly, the boy is not the type to come back when asked nicely. If anything, he would grow even more defiant."

"Then order the border troops to detain him and send him home."

"There are...complications."

Albert explained that the military was currently under the jurisdiction of another of the seven great noble families, House Giesz. Thus, the military was beholden to House Giesz's orders over Albert's. An attempt at a forceful intervention would bruise the Giesz family's ego and create unnecessary conflict.

"Of course," he continued, "any decisions from the crown or the Council of the Seven take precedence over House Giesz's authority. But it wouldn't be appropriate to involve the royal family or convene the council over what amounts to my brother running away from home."

"And you can't ask House Giesz to return him?"

"If only. Relations between noble houses are rarely so straightforward. House Giesz has long had a competitive streak when it comes to us, so to them, my brother Rubel must feel like a valuable bargaining chip that's landed conveniently in their lap. I

doubt they'd outright mistreat him, but anything can happen on a battlefield."

"So in short, your brother has become a card in House Giesz's hand?"

"Inadvertently, yes. The seven great noble houses might appear unified on the surface, but underneath, there's a constant tug of war over influence and other various areas of interest. If I were to formally request Rubel's return, House Giesz would doubtless make excuses as to why they can't help."

"And let me guess, you're telling me all this because you want me to bring your brother back."

"Your shrewdness is appreciated," Albert said with an angelic smile. "Either way, as acting head of House Baycladd while my father is bedridden, I'm obligated to stay in the capital. I can't leave the city. And given the situation, I can't rely on military personnel, nor can I send anyone officially connected to House Baycladd without causing further tension with House Giesz. So, when I saw you, I thought it a stroke of luck. I've been looking for someone trustworthy, who is not military and has no ties to my family, to handle this."

Zenos scratched his head. "You think I'm trustworthy? Are you kidding?"

"Do you think I'm lying to you?"

"You don't trust anyone."

Albert's eyes narrowed slightly, but his smile didn't falter. "Ha! Ha ha ha. I like you, Zenos. That's precisely why I want to ask for your help. I'd appreciate it if you could bring my brother back as smoothly and discreetly as possible."

Zenos studied Albert's chiseled, elegant face and folded his arms. "What's in it for me?"

"Name your price. My brother may be a handful, but he's my blood all the same. I can't leave him to his fate."

"Are you doing this for him, then? Or is it for your bloodline's sake?"

Albert chuckled softly. "What an unfair thing to ask. Would you even believe me if I answered honestly? Let us keep to the matter at

hand."

Zenos let out a small sigh. "Fine. I'll take payment equal to the amount of effort involved. I'll bill you once the job's done."

"Of course. I'll give you a blank invoice. You can write in any amount you want after you bring my brother back." Albert leaned back on the seat. "I must admit, I'm surprised. I thought negotiating with you would be more difficult."

"I told you, I have my own reasons to be doing this."

While speaking with Albert, Zenos had come to the realization that the child in fancy clothes seen with Lily could very well be Albert's brother Rubel. Though Zenos had no idea how Lily had ended up in the company of a boy from one of the seven great noble houses, it did mean that finding Rubel would lead to her.

Zenos glanced briefly at his pack beside him. "I have one condition."

"Name it."

"Get me on a wagon heading for the command center."

For Zenos, the ticket to the command center was worth far more than any payment—*that* was why he'd agreed to Albert's request. Since Lily was traveling with Rubel, she was likely headed in that direction.

"Of course. While I cannot use a heavy hand with the military, that much should be simple. Besides, that's where Rubel should be." Albert leaned over to his butler and whispered something, and the butler gave a quiet nod before exiting the vehicle.

"By the way... You don't think it'll raise any flags that the military saw us talking? Won't House Giesz take issue with you working with me?"

If what Albert had said was true, any connection between Zenos and House Baycladd could pose an obstacle, should word of it reach Lord Giesz.

"Those are low-ranking soldiers," Albert said, unconcerned. "It's easy enough to control the flow of information with a group of that size. I guarantee they won't report what they saw to House Giesz."

"You *guarantee* it, huh..." Through bribes, perhaps? Or something else?

"Heh heh. Believe it or not, I'm actually quite a powerful man," Albert said with a sly grin, extending his right hand toward Zenos. "We have a deal, then. My brother is in your capable hands, Zenos."

Chapter Two: The Western Defensive Line

"Oh no... What do I do...?" Lily lamented, clutching her head in her hands.

Feeling the faint vibrations beneath her seat, Lily wondered how much time had passed since the carriage left the royal capital. There were no visible buildings around anymore—only an endless sea of green grass swaying in the wind. Plus, this was no ordinary carriage. The windows were smaller than usual, with lead-gray reinforced frames that looked almost like armor.

She glanced at the boy sitting across from her and asked, "Hey, Rubel? Is it true we're heading to a battlefield?"

Rubel nodded matter-of-factly. "Yeah, it's true. The western border is in trouble, and they need my strength. That's why I decided to join the military expedition."

"Why? It's dangerous out there!"

"That's precisely why I'm going. It's the perfect chance to prove my valor, don't you think?"

"But you're just a kid!"

Rubel snorted dismissively. "You sound exactly like my brother."

So he had an older brother.

"If you can talk casually with military officers, you must be important, right, Rubel?"

"I'm from one of the seven great noble houses."

"Wh-*What*?!" Lily stammered, her eyes wide with shock. He was much higher ranked than she'd expected. "You're *that* important?!"

"I'm not important," Rubel replied in a sour tone. "My father and brother are."

Lily had noticed during her time at Ledelucia Academy that those of the highest rank often spoke casually even to poor people—

possibly out of confidence in their station. Perhaps Rubel was the same way? And perhaps, since he was still a child, he didn't fully grasp social hierarchy or its implications yet.

"Please, Rubel, I need to go back," Lily said. "Can't you ask the soldiers to turn the carriage around and take me to the capital? I'm sure everyone's worried about me since I disappeared so suddenly..."

"Everyone?"

"Y-Yeah. The people I live with."

"Oh, your parents? I suppose most parents worry about their kids, huh?"

The unexpected question left Lily momentarily speechless. She coughed lightly before finally replying, "Um... I don't live with my parents."

"Siblings, then."

"Not siblings either."

"Servants? Maids?"

"No."

"Chefs? Gardeners? Artists?"

"Normal homes don't have those!"

"Then who *do* you live with?" Rubel pressed, now irritated.

A genius unlicensed healer, a mischievous undead of the highest rank, and a bunch of demi-human leaders, all of whom were practically family. It was a warm, lively home. But...she couldn't explain that to him.

"Um, just...some people I know."

"People you know? So...random people?"

"They're not *random people*!" Lily inadvertently shouted.

Leaning on the window, Rubel glared at her. "Then what are they to you?"

"Um... Well..." Lily trailed off, unable to find the words to explain her relationship with them. Because, now that she thought about it, what *was* their relationship anyway? They'd met by chance and ended up living together, but weren't related by blood. She found herself struggling to justify why they were together at all.

"Hmph," Rubel scoffed coldly. "It's not like blood ties are all that meaningful either. No one cares if I wander around the slums or

make friends with the poor. If my own family doesn't worry about me, why would a bunch of random people?" He turned his gaze back to the window. "That's why I'll do something great on the battlefield. That'll make them care."

"Something great..." Lily echoed softly. She couldn't read the emotions in Rubel's jet-black eyes, but she could feel one thing clearly. This carriage wasn't going to turn back.

"We're approaching the Western Defensive Line outpost," said the coachman's voice from outside.

Ahead of them lay a hilly area, and on one particularly high hill stood a rustic, brick-built fortress.

Lily clenched her hands tightly on her lap, staring down at her fists. *Oh no... Zenos, what should I do...?*

***

"Hmm...?"

"What's wrong?" Zenos asked the wraith in his bag.

"I am under the impression I heard Lily internally screaming. Perhaps she is having a difficult time? But...that does mean she is safe for the time being."

"Huh."

"What manner of blasé reaction is that?! Show respect for a wraith's superb intuition!"

Zenos smiled at Carmilla's protest. "Oh, I wasn't trying to be disrespectful. I was just thinking it's an interesting coincidence that I felt the same thing."

"Ah. So you are becoming a wraith as well."

"I...don't think that's how that works."

Once they'd bantered themselves out for the moment, Zenos took a quick look at their surroundings. They were inside a wagon headed for the border, a number of the poor who'd signed up to be border patrol officers alongside them. The vehicle was crammed at least three times over its maximum capacity—some of its occupants were muttering to themselves to try and stay in high spirits, while others were happily chattering away. He wasn't familiar with any of them,

which fortunately meant he wasn't attracting any attention.

"This carriage is overcrowded," Carmilla complained. "A frail maiden such as myself is hardly fit for this suffocating environment. Unbelievable."

"Can wraiths be maidens?"

"Am I not *clearly* one myself?"

"Right..."

"Oh? Are you not going to sass me about how 'no maiden would feed on souls,' or some such?"

"You know, I've known you for a while now, but I *still* don't know how to handle you."

"Hee hee. My mystique is simply part of my maidenly charms," Carmilla declared with a restrained laugh. "Still, we could have taken the offer to ride in the more luxurious carriage."

"Remember that thing about me not wanting to draw attention?"

After his conversation with Albert Baycladd, Zenos had exited the magical vehicle and returned to the makeshift recruitment tent. Albert's butler had already pulled some strings, and the soldiers' attitudes toward him had noticeably changed.

"Oh, sir, no need to be shy!" one of them had said with exaggerated politeness. "You should've told us you were acquainted with such an upstanding noble!"

"I'm getting a bit of emotional whiplash here," Zenos had commented.

He'd been offered a ride in a luxury carriage, but a poor man riding with senior military officers would have attracted the wrong kind of attention on arrival. Besides, the army was under House Giesz's jurisdiction and couldn't suspect his involvement with House Baycladd. So he'd declined, saying he didn't mind riding with everyone else.

Truthfully, he didn't care about Houses Baycladd and Giesz's dynamic, but exposing himself and getting dragged into their mess wasn't something he could afford. What mattered was that this carriage was headed toward the area where the headquarters were —and that Albert Baycladd's younger brother, and by extension Lily, were probably there too.

"An attack by a horde of magical beasts seems odd," Carmilla murmured from the pack.

"How come?"

The army had briefed everyone on the situation before their departure. A number of magical beasts and other monsters had appeared in the area known as the Western Defensive Line, and the recruitment drive for border patrol officers was meant to bolster defenses in the region. Additionally, since the army's main forces were still stationed at the northern front due to the ongoing confrontation with the Malavaar Empire, the royal capital would be sending reinforcements to the west from its own defensive force.

"Isn't there an area nearby that's infested with magical beasts? What's so surprising about the attack?" Zenos asked.

"The Yanul Marshlands, yes," Carmilla confirmed. "But it is odd that magical beasts would willingly form large groups, exit the marshlands, and attack the border."

"You think a big one appeared, like in Zagras? Maybe that's what's agitating them?"

Powerful magical beasts tended to attract lesser ones to their vicinity. A month ago, when an S Rank magical beast had awoken from its long slumber in Zagras, the number of beasts in the area had increased.

"Hmm... Perhaps, but...still, it would be odd for agitated beasts to form groups and head for the border in an organized manner."

"That *would* be contradictory, wouldn't it..." Zenos muttered, furrowing his brows.

"Oh well," Carmilla said nonchalantly. "It matters not."

"It doesn't?!"

"Whether this incident is a simple attack by rampant magical beasts or something more sinister, 'tis a disaster all the same."

"No arguments there..." And either way, Lily had been dragged into the situation and taken to a battlefield. "I'm just a back-alley shadow healer. I'm not cut out for this."

Carmilla chuckled, then muttered under her breath, "A disaster for the enemy, of course."

"Huh? Did you say something?"

“No, nothing. We had best quit chattering, lest the others grow suspicious.”

With that, Carmilla cut the conversation short, though a faint suppressed chuckle rose from within Zenos’s bag.

“Hee hee hee... Wonderful. Their unnecessary meddling has attracted the most troublesome man in all of the nation to the battlefield.”

***

At the western border of the Kingdom of Herzeth lay the Western Defensive Line, its irregular terrain filled with hills both large and small. Beyond the border were the Yanul Marshlands, an area infested with magical beasts that belonged to no particular nation. Thus, the primary duty of the soldiers stationed there was to exterminate stray magical beasts that wandered too close to the border. These beasts were few and far between, which meant the atmosphere in the area was generally relaxed.

This had not been the case over the past week. Magical beasts coming from the marshlands had been attacking the area relentlessly, day and night, leaving the troops permanently on edge. Exhaustion and injuries were piling up, gradually thinning out the forces stationed there.

Despite the situation, a certain man—who had arrived not long ago in an opulent carriage—had the audacity to yawn and rub his bulging gut. “I am General Higarth of the Royal Guard. I have come all the way from the capital to grace you lot with my presence. I trust you understand what a great honor that is.”

Standing stiffly in front of the man was a woman clad in dark-brown armor. Her features, delicate at a glance, were framed by fiery red locks, while her limbs were taut with muscles like coiled springs and her gaze was piercing as a sharp blade. “Melissa Tarque, commander of the Western Defense Corps.”

Picking his ear, Higarth replied, “Huh. The famous Flare Maiden from the north? I hear you’re quite formidable on the battlefield.”

“You honor me, sir.”

"I also hear you were held responsible for the army's defeat at Lerma Valley, and were thus demoted to the lowly commander of this backwater rabble. Bah ha ha ha!"

Melissa said nothing as Higarth guffawed, his belly jiggling.

"Listen. I care not about your fancy little moniker," he continued. "I am your superior officer and will be taking command of the Western Defensive Line. Remember that."

"Yes, sir," Melissa responded politely. She then surveyed the troops that had arrived with Higarth. "Are these all our reinforcements?"

"Do not be impudent, girl. We cannot divert forces from the northern front and weaken our defenses against the Malavaar Empire. It was only thanks to Lord Giesz's magnanimity that the Capital Defense Corps were mobilized. Our mission is, first and foremost, to guard the capital day and night. Be grateful that reinforcements came at all!"

"Yes, sir! My apologies, sir!"

"And to supplement the soldiers, I have brought plenty of poor rats. Use them as you please. Human shields, expendable pawns, it matters not."

"Yes, General," Melissa said, bowing her head.

After Higarth walked away, she looked up with a sour expression. "He has no idea what situation we're in, does he?"

"Apparently, that guy only got to become a general by buttering up his superiors," a soldier whispered to her. "The capital is peaceful, so brownnosing gets you ahead more than skill."

"That may be so, but...rank is everything in the military," Melissa remarked matter-of-factly.

And not just in the military either—rank dictated everything in this country. Just earlier, some pampered noble child had arrived alongside an elven girl without a care in the world. What luxury to come to a battlefield as though on a scenic date.

"This is not a day care," Melissa muttered before sighing at the sight of the arriving wagons, crammed full of poor people. "And what are we supposed to do with all of them?"

"The general said they're disposable."

"A mob of untrained civilians will only cause chaos."

While it wasn't uncommon for the poor to be recruited as border patrol officers, the system only worked because the military oversaw the process strictly. But right now, with the endless attacks from magical beasts draining both resources and manpower, they couldn't afford to train or manage these people.

"The higher-ups seem to think numbers alone will win us this conflict, but they couldn't be more wrong," Melissa said.

"Skill is what matters," the soldier agreed. "Hopefully some of them can actually be of use."

Melissa heaved another deep sigh. "There's no way anyone from the slums will be of any use on the battlefield."

***

"Finally, we're here."

After several days of travel, Zenos had arrived at the Western Defensive Line. He climbed down from the wagon and stretched.

"What a miserable journey that was," Carmilla muttered. "My whole body feels stiff."

"What body?" Zenos retorted as usual while surveying the surrounding area.

The Western Defensive Line was a hilly region dotted with scattered patches of bare rock. The sunlight was intense, but the area was windy enough that it didn't grow too hot. Still, the wind carried with it the smells of smoke, blood, and decay—unmistakably marking the place as a battlefield.

"Lily might be over there," Carmilla pointed out.

Atop a particularly large hill stood a towering fortress, its brick walls discolored from the relentless sunlight. That had to be where the Western Defensive Line's command center was. Odds were that Rubel, the youngest son of House Baycladd—and consequently Lily, who was likely accompanying him—were both there as well.

As Zenos started walking toward the fortress, a sharp voice called out from behind him. "You there! Who gave you permission to walk around?! Get over here!"

He turned around to see a stern-looking soldier motioning him over. Not wanting to cause any trouble so soon, Zenos obeyed and moved to what appeared to be a plaza in front of the fortress. A large group of poor people was already gathered there, murmuring in both excitement and unease.

As Zenos stood near the back of the crowd, a red-haired, sharp-eyed woman clad in dark-brown armor stepped up onto a platform at the front and stood tall.

"Silence," she commanded, the razor-sharp edge to her voice rendering the crowd quiet in an instant. Without so much as a twitch, she opened her thin lips to continue. "Welcome. I am Melissa Tarque, commander of the Western Defense Corps." Her voice was strong and clear, carrying easily through the plaza as she turned her gaze to the man behind her. "First, a word from our commanding officer. General, if you would?"

"Why should I waste my breath on this filth?" grumbled the pudgy man behind her, scowling. Zenos recognized him—it was the same arrogant man he'd seen in the slums.

Standing firm, the female commander responded without hesitation. "Because these are soldiers risking their lives at the front. As their commanding officer, it would be appropriate for you to give them a word of encouragement."

"As if cannon fodder needs encouragement," he scoffed. "What a bother."

With his hearing enhanced by magic, Zenos picked up on the conversation clearly.

Eventually, the general acquiesced, stroking his thin mustache as he hoisted himself onto the platform with a grunt.

"Now listen here, filth. I am General Higarth, the most illustrious man here. Lowly insects such as yourselves should be grateful for the chance to serve under someone like me." Condescending as ever, he continued, "I shall teach you imbeciles one thing. In the military, rank is absolute. If your superior tells you to run, you run. If they say eat, you eat. If they say sleep, you sleep. And if they say die, you *die*. Obey, and do not question. That's all the likes of you need to concern yourselves with. Am I clear?"

Zenos stared wordlessly at the so-called general on the platform.

Higarth groaned. "Ugh, this place is unbearably hot, and it stinks besides. You lot handle the rest."

"Yes, sir!"

When the bloated general—who looked nothing at all like a soldier—left the area, the female commander from before stepped back up onto the platform.

"You are now under command of the military as border patrol officers," she told the crowd. "This means you must abide by military regulations. Violators shall be strictly punished as per our code of conduct."

At her hip hung a large sword, noticeably bigger than an ordinary one. Even sheathed, its sheer presence was incredibly intimidating, causing a few of the people in the crowd to take an instinctive step back.

"In return, those who deliver results shall be rewarded," she continued. "Serve and protect your country."

The crowd's mood seemed to change with that statement.

From within Zenos's bag, Carmilla whispered, sounding a little impressed, "A master at balancing the carrot and the stick. Look how skillfully she herds a group of people who have always lived outside the bounds of discipline. That pig-headed general is hopeless, but this woman seems quite competent."

"Pig-headed general," Zenos echoed wryly.

Melissa then went on to explain that a horde of magical beasts coming from the Yanul Marshlands had breached the border, and that as newly conscripted border patrol officers, their duty would be to repel them.

"Now then, you will be sorted into groups based on your skill. Take up a weapon," she instructed, raising a hand.

A soldier brought over several baskets filled with swords and spears as Melissa descended from the platform. A few more seasoned-looking soldiers lined up in front of the crowd, neatly spaced.

"This is a battlefield," she said. "Normally, you would undergo thorough training before being sent to the front lines, but the

situation is dire. Time is not a luxury we can afford. Therefore, you will be divided between those who can fight and those who cannot, with the skilled ones expected to lead the rest." Melissa looked over the crowd. "Now, choose one of us to fight. One strike is all it will take for me to gauge your abilities."

"Testing our skill, eh? Fine. Whatever." One man stepped forward and picked up a sword, his arm muscles bulging as he gripped its hilt. He pointed the blade at Melissa. "So if I show you what I'm made of, I get something out of it?"

"As I said earlier, those who can fight will be made leaders of their squads. It's easier to keep everyone in line that way. With the higher position comes an increase in pay as well."

Whistles rose from the crowd, quickly silenced by Melissa's deadly glare. The man before her, however, showed no sign of fear. Instead, he licked his lips with the confidence of someone who was certain of his skill.

"So if, say, I kick *your* ass, do I get to be a commander like you?"

Melissa narrowed her eyes slightly and sighed. "You think you can defeat me? In your dreams."

"Take this!" the man shouted as he charged forward, swinging down the sword with all his might.

Melissa didn't move. She slightly lowered her stance, inhaled, and placed her hand on her own sword's hilt. There was a sharp whoosh, and the man instantly vanished from sight. Next thing anyone knew, he was spinning through the air, shrieking as he came plummeting down to the ground. He landed hard on his back and fell unconscious, his eyes rolled up into his skull.

The commander's sword was still in its sheath, meaning she'd struck him with the scabbard. The man wasn't dead, but he'd been taken out in a single blow.

"She's strong," Zenos muttered under his breath, folding his arms.

Aska, the Sword Saint, with whom Zenos had adventured last month, was likely the greatest sword user in all of Herzeth. Melissa didn't quite match Aska's speed, but her strength—which allowed her to wield such a massive blade with ease—and her commanding presence were undeniable. Her skills had clearly been forged across

countless battles.

"You're a three," she declared, regarding the unconscious man coolly. "And the rest of you, know this: You are valuable combatants here. Normally, I'd have held back, but his insolence was an affront to a superior officer. As such, it was punished as a breach of military discipline. Soldiers, take this man to the medical tent."

Melissa watched as her subordinates loaded the man onto a stretcher, then turned back to the crowd.

"Your skills will be graded on a scale of one to ten. To qualify as a squad leader, you need at least a five, but preferably a six or more. Now, show me what you can do."

The crowd stood frozen, stunned by what they'd just witnessed.

"Answer me!" Melissa snapped.

"Y-Yes, ma'am!"

The crowd scrambled to grab weapons and began taking turns striking the soldiers acting as examiners.

"Three. Line up where you were told."

"One! Useless! With skills like those, you couldn't even act as a human shield!"

"Five. Not bad. All candidates for group leaders, gather at the eastern side of the plaza."

Shouts from the conscripts and grading calls from the soldiers echoed throughout the area as the process continued. However, perhaps intimidated by Melissa's overwhelming display of skill, none dared challenge her directly. Perhaps dissatisfied or simply bored, the commander pursed her lips in irritation. But...

"Oh? You've got guts," she said as Zenos stepped forward with a weapon in hand, her expression softening slightly. "You're at least a three."

"Huh? How come?" Zenos asked.

"It's an acknowledgment of the courage it took to challenge me, even after seeing that man go down in a single blow."

Zenos scratched his cheek awkwardly. "Well, I'm not trying to be gutsy, really. It's just, you know, poor people like me don't usually get the chance to talk to high-ranking military officers."

Melissa furrowed her brow as Zenos looked up at the fortress on

the hill.

"I just wanted to ask...have a noble boy and an elf girl come here?"

After a brief silence, Melissa replied, her expression unchanging, "I don't understand the purpose of your inquiry, but either way, I will not answer any questions unrelated to your role on the battlefield."

"Pretty discreet, I see." It was obvious she wasn't about to reveal the presence of a noble's child to a random poor man, as one would expect from a soldier. He decided to try a different tactic, keeping it relevant to the situation. "Then let me ask something else. Can commoners go inside the fortress? To defend it, I mean."

"Only regular military personnel and their associates are allowed inside. The fortress does not have the capacity to house all of you, and we cannot be sure that none of you harbor malicious intent."

The poor had no official records and no form of identification, making ascertaining their origins nearly impossible. There was always the risk that someone planning to commit treason or a spy could slip in. It was reasonable to prohibit them from entering an important stronghold. Zenos had managed to come close to Rubel and Lily—assuming they actually *were* in the fortress—but it seemed a significant hurdle remained.

"Your role is to patrol the border, prevent enemies from reaching the fortress, and buy time until army reinforcements arrive," Melissa explained.

In short, their job was to serve as the first line of defense, acting as a living barricade. That was what Higarth had meant by "shields."

Still, Melissa seemed intent on structuring teams and maintaining as much order as possible. If the conscripts acted without guidance, the first line of defense would collapse quickly, resulting in more casualties than necessary even among the poor themselves. Her effort to make the most of what she had was certainly commendable.

"Now then, I have no time to waste on conversation. Come at me."

"Sorry, one more question. You mentioned earlier that military personnel and their 'associates' could go in there. Who qualifies as

an associate, exactly?"

Melissa, growing impatient, began to approach Zenos slowly. "It's nothing special. If an officer acknowledges you as an associate, you'll be allowed in."

"Then can you acknowledge me as your associate if I score a perfect ten in your test?"

The commander came to an abrupt stop. "According to our grading criteria, that would put you on par with a regular military squad leader." She reached for the sword at her waist. "Very well. But to be clear, I despise people who are all talk."

"Works for me," Zenos said, lowering his stance slightly. "I can't afford to not deliver on my promises."

***

That stance... He looks like he's mimicking what he's seen others do.

Melissa watched the black-cloaked man carefully, her hand brushing the hilt of her sword. He showed no signs of being intimidated by her presence, nor did he seem to be a complete novice, but his stance and movements were far from orthodox. He didn't strike her as a seasoned swordsman either.

All talk, no action. Again.

She'd seen too many men like that. How dull. The best way to put them in their place was to show them the gap in power through sheer skill.

The man exhaled, closing the distance between them. His eyes stayed locked on hers—this, at least, was praiseworthy. He seemed to understand that even a moment's lapse in focus could mean death on the battlefield.

He was eight paces away. Next he would lift his sword, and she would strike his exposed flank with a single, decisive—


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Clang!

Melissa had to quickly shift her sword's trajectory, lifting it above her head instead of targeting the man. Sparks scattered with the violent clash of the two blades, the sound of metal on metal reverberating through the air. Melissa's knee dipped under the impact. The sheer speed and power behind his swing had caught her completely off guard, and her mind briefly reeled in confusion. Her plan had been to end this in one strike, but had she not shifted to defense, she could've been in serious danger.

"Wow, I wasn't expecting you to block," the man remarked.

"Shut up!" Melissa snapped.

His casual comment lit a fire in her. She swung her sword, now raised high, in a powerful diagonal slash. The man held his sword vertically, cleanly parrying the downward strike. Melissa had thought the force would send him flying, but his body barely lifted off the ground.

"What the...?" she blurted out. "How can you have that kind of core strength with your build? And how can you see my sword strikes?"

"I'm confident in my muscle strength and reflexes," the man replied. "Right now, anyway."

Melissa didn't fully grasp the meaning of his cryptic remark, but she charged again and again. Their swords clashed repeatedly, metallic sounds ringing out as showers of sparks erupted between them.

"Haaah!"

"Commander!" one of the soldiers called out, interrupting Melissa mid-swing and making her slowly turn toward him. "What are you doing, ma'am? This is just an evaluation for squad assignments."

"Right..." she muttered.

Coming to her senses, Melissa realized how absorbed she'd been in their clash. Around them, calls of "You're a two" and "Three!" filled the air. She'd been so engrossed that she hadn't even noticed.

Melissa sheathed her sword and turned to the man before her. "What's your name?"

"Zenos."

“Zenos. I see. I’ve never heard of you.”

“I don’t like attention.”

“What a waste of skill for you to be a poor man. That sword style...are you self-taught? You’re holding your weapon wrong.”

Zenos had chosen a single-edged sword, but every strike had been made with the back of the blade—the blunt side.

“I mean, the sharp side hurts,” he replied nonchalantly.

“You held back on purpose? Against *me*?”

“I mean, you kept your sword in its sheath.”

Melissa was silent for a moment, then burst out laughing.

Zenos stared at her, bewildered. “Anyway... What’s my score? Did I get a ten?”

“No. You’re definitely not a ten.”

“Wait, what?” Zenos asked, looking genuinely shocked.

Melissa smiled. “You’re a twenty. You’ll serve directly under me.”

***

Meanwhile, inside one of the fortress’s rooms, Albert Baycladd’s younger brother, Rubel Baycladd, was making demands of a guard.

“Hey!” the boy snapped with an irritated expression. “When am I going into battle?”

“We cannot send the son of a high-ranking noble to a battlefield without knowing the situation there. Please, my lord, wait a bit longer.”

“You’ve been saying that forever!”

After a bit more pointless arguing, Rubel stormed back into his personal room, his shoulders tense with frustration.

“Damn it! How am I supposed to become a decorated member of the military like this?!”

“Rubel, why are you so eager to go into battle?” asked Lily, who was standing by the window looking at the scenery outside.

Since the room faced away from the border, they couldn’t see the battlefield from there. The shouts of soldiers occasionally carried on the wind, however, making it painfully clear this place was anything but peaceful.

Rubel flopped onto the sofa near the wall. “Hmph. Why do you care?”

From their previous conversations, Rubel seemed to resent his family for some reason. His friendship with Lily, a poor girl from the slums, seemed to be another act of rebellion against them. Still, for that rebellion to include dragging her all the way to the border was a bit much.

“Hey, Rubel, I really need to go home.”

“Ugh, it’s always ‘home this’ and ‘home that’ with you. You’re the one who said you wanted to be my friend!”

“Um, yes, but...”

Lily turned to look at Rubel, who was pouting, his cheeks puffed out in irritation, and hesitated. Maybe his mutinous behavior against his family was only part of the story. Maybe he was genuinely lonely. As a high-ranking noble child, he probably had no peers he could be friends with. And if that was the case, she didn’t want to be too harsh with him.

Still, she couldn’t stay here indefinitely.

“Oh...!” Lily exclaimed. The loose lock of hair atop her head pointed straight up at the ceiling.

“Wh-What now?” Rubel asked.

“My Lily senses are tingling.”

“Your what?”

Actually, Lily had been using a detection spell in hopes of sensing Zenos nearby. But since she could only use beginner-level magic, her range was limited to just a few meters. Using the spell had been more hopeful than calculated, but still—if the spell had picked something up, it could mean Zenos was nearby.

Lily began pacing around the room excitedly. “Wh-Where?! Where is he?!”

“What are you going on about, you lunatic?” Rubel asked, watching her with suspicion.

But then, Lily’s hair suddenly went slack, drooping back into place. “Huh?”

Her shoulders sagged with disappointment. Had it been a false alarm?

“Aw, man...”

***

Just before that, Zenos had been in the general’s office, located directly below the room where Lily was.

“So it’s not allowed?”

“Of course not, Commander Tarque. You cannot have a slum rat serving directly under you. Are you out of your mind? What if he spreads disease around the fortress? He must not be allowed to loiter in here!”

Melissa had brought Zenos with her into the fortress, saying she needed permission from her commanding officer to take him into her service. But Higarth, who’d been put in charge of the Western Defensive Line, had furrowed his brows and flatly rejected the idea.

“But General Higarth, this man is skilled,” she insisted, still standing perfectly upright. “He could be of great use in defending the border.”

“Men like him are only good as cannon fodder,” the middle-aged man remarked derisively, his bloated belly shaking. He glared intensely at Zenos. “Besides, I remember you—and how you disrespected me when I went to the slums.”

“I don’t remember being disrespectful, actually,” Zenos retorted. If anything, he’d been the one who’d been disrespected.

“Silence, rat!” Higarth snapped, his greasy face leaning in close. “You will be sent to the front lines tomorrow to act as a shield against the beasts, as you should. Be grateful I don’t execute you right here! Now go! Get out of my sight! You’re polluting the air!”

“But Gener—”

“Enough, Commander Tarque! Have you forgotten who’s in charge here?!”

“My apologies, sir,” Melissa muttered. Biting her lip, she bowed and left the room with Zenos in tow.

“Unbelievable,” Higarth grumbled from behind the closed door, his voice ringing clear in Zenos’s enhanced ears. “Not only do I have to detain that noble *brat* for ‘negotiation purposes’ and that elven

‘friend’ of his besides, now I have to deal with *this* too? Preposterous!”

As she walked down the corridor with Zenos, Melissa sighed and cast her gaze downward. “I’m sorry, Zenos. I know I said you’d be serving directly under me, but...” She paused. “Wait a moment. Do you know the general?”

“I met him in the slums before, during the recruitment drive.”

“I see. Well, you might not like hearing this, but in the military, the orders of a superior are absolute. If I were to go against his word, I’d set a precedent for my own men to disobey protocol.” Melissa slammed her fist against the wall in frustration. “Damn it.”

“Well, I did get something out of that conversation. So thanks.”

Thanks to Higarth’s muttering, Zenos now knew that Lily was indeed in the fortress with Rubel. Though the exact circumstances were unclear, if she was here as the friend of a boy from one of the seven great noble houses, that meant odds were she wouldn’t be going into battle anytime soon. It gave Zenos some time to figure things out, if nothing else.

“Besides, I’m used to that kind of treatment,” he continued. “If anything, you’re the odd one here, trying to take a poor man into your service.”

Melissa proudly puffed out her chest. “Crossing swords with a warrior tells you far more about them than a hundred words ever could. Surely, as a swordsman yourself, you understand this?”

“I’m not exactly a swordsman...”

“Hah! What else could you be, if you can match me in swordplay?”

“I mean... Oh, never mind.” Zenos brought a hand to his head and sighed. “Anyway, it’s off to the front lines for me tomorrow, huh? Bummer.”

But perhaps it was inevitable. All of the poor would be sent to the front lines sooner or later. And they were near the border, far from the royal capital. He had no means to transport Rubel and Lily back; stealing a horse meant pursuers would give chase immediately. Plus, Albert had warned him that Rubel wasn’t the obedient sort.

Stabilizing the situation at the border was necessary either way.

“Oh well. Nothing I can do about it, so I may as well see what’s happening there.”

“That’s not the kind of thing you ‘may as well’ do,” Melissa said, incredulous.

“I’ll just have to tack on a giant surcharge for the extra effort.”

“A what?”

“Nothing.”

Melissa clenched her fists. “I’m sorry there’s nothing more I can do. But if you can make a name for yourself at the front lines, I’ll be able to openly back you. It’ll also make it easier to get any requests from you approved.”

“That would be helpful. Thanks.”

“I should be out there, leading, but the general has assigned me as his personal guard and errand grunt,” Melissa muttered through dry lips. “I’ll wrap up and head to the front as quickly as I can. It’s disastrous out there under his command.” Melissa’s expression turned serious. “That being said...”

Zenos tilted his head slightly.

“I will be praying for your victory, Zenos. Do not die.”

The words hung heavy in the air, as a reminder that this was in fact a battlefield. Zenos nodded silently and left the fortress.

On his way back to the plaza, he looked up at the sun-beaten structure. Going inside had given him some insight into Lily’s situation, which was reassuring, but he wished he’d at least been able to see her. She must have been feeling anxious, he figured, having been suddenly sent to the border like this.

“Hey,” he called out to the bag slung over his shoulder. “Got a second?”

***

Night fell over the western border, shrouding the world outside the window in darkness. In one of the VIP rooms at the fortress’s top floor, Lily rolled over on the bed with a sigh.

“I can’t sleep...”

Earlier that day, Lily had thought she’d sensed Zenos, but now

she figured she must've imagined it. She was so far from home, and not by choice, but by some strange twist of fate. She didn't have her usual tea to calm her nerves. She didn't have her usual friends, or their warm laughter.

Lily felt so lonely.

Still sighing, she was about to get out of bed when—

"Waaah!" came a scream from the next room.

"Rubel?!"

Lily rushed out of her room in a panic just as the fortress guards arrived, led by a female soldier with short red hair.

"Lord Rubel! I am Melissa Tarque, commander of the army! What is happening?!"

She peeked through the open door and saw Rubel sitting in the middle of the room, frozen in terror.

"Gh-Gh-Ghost! It's a ghost!" he stammered, pointing at the window.

"A ghost? As in, an undead monster?"

The soldiers furrowed their brows, cautiously inching closer to the window. After examining the outside for a few moments, they relaxed their stances.

"There doesn't seem to be anything there."

"N-No way," Rubel protested. "I saw it! Are you calling me a liar?!"

"No, my lord."

"Increase security! Keep me safe! If it appears again—"

"Lord Rubel," Melissa said in a low tone. "We will protect you, of course, as you command. But this is a battlefield. Attacks from countless magical beasts happen daily. Many lives are being lost as we speak."

Rubel took a moment to process those words, as if realizing the weight of the situation for the first time. "Many...lives..."

"If you truly intend to fight here, you cannot be frightened by a mere ghost."

"I-I know that!" Rubel snapped, his cheeks flushing bright red. "I-I was just...startled! It's fine! You can go back to your posts!"

Flustered, he ushered the guards out of his room and slammed

the door shut. Melissa ordered two of the soldiers to remain stationed outside Rubel's door, while the others returned to their original duties.

Now back in her own room, adjacent to Rubel's, Lily paced barefoot across the carpet and pressed a finger against her cheek.

"A ghost," she muttered, slowly moving toward the window. "Wait..."

Sensing a presence, Lily looked up to find a translucent woman clad in black drifting through the night just outside the window. The woman's long jet-black hair blended into the darkness, and her skin was paler than white. Her bloodred lips were curled into a mischievous grin.

"Carmilla!" Lily exclaimed before quickly covering her mouth.

The wraith effortlessly passed through the window and landed gracefully inside the room.

"Hee hee... It would appear I went into the wrong room earlier. An accident, I assure you. How have you been, Lily?"

"Carmilla! It's you! Right? It's really you?"

"But of course! Who else could exude such an aura of elegant refinement?"

"Yaaay!" Overjoyed, Lily bounced up and down for a moment before suddenly stopping. "Wait, if you're here, that means...!"


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"Indeed. He, too, is here."

"Zenos!" Lily yelled, her voice cracking with excitement and prompting her to quickly cover her mouth again. So it *had* been him that her detection spell had picked up!

Carmilla settled onto the sofa in the room with her legs crossed. "He was in the room just below yours earlier today. But some pigheaded general took offense to his presence and decided to send him to the front lines starting tomorrow." She chuckled. "That man truly is skilled at getting himself in trouble."

"Pigheaded general?" Lily echoed. "And...front lines?"

After the wraith gave Lily a summary of the recent events, the young elf found herself sinking to the floor with her head in her hands.

"Oh no... Zenos signed up to become a soldier because of me, and now he's going to the front lines..."

Carmilla snickered. "He truly is entertaining, that one. I look forward to seeing what tricks our shadow healer pulls from his sleeve on the field of battle."

"Now's not the time to be amused, Carmilla!" Lily said anxiously.

The wraith stood, floating gracefully over to Lily and giving the elf a pat on the head. "Worry not about Zenos. I have a message from him, by the by."

"A message?"

Carmilla crossed her arms in an exaggeratedly cool pose, lowered her voice, and declared, "I will see you home safe. Wait for me."

"Umm...are you trying to do an impression of Zenos?"

"I will see you home safe. Wait for me, my beloved Lily."

"Why are you repeating it? And why did the message get longer?"

"Heh heh. I simply embellished it a bit."

Lily clenched her fists tightly, pressing them against her chest as if at a loss for words.

"Is something the matter, Lily?"

"N-No, just... Um, Rubel, he... Er, that's the boy in the next room over. He said that even though we live together, we're all just 'random people' to each other. I told him he was wrong, but..."

At the time, Lily hadn't been able to refute him properly. Rubel

had claimed even blood ties were meaningless. So...what did that mean for people like them, who weren't even related?

When Lily explained this, Carmilla chuckled once more. "Well, he is not wholly incorrect. We are not, in fact, related by blood. We may as well be random people. However, Zenos *did* come all this way for you. This is a fact."

Lily was silent.

"And I, the Lich Queen, to whom all owe deference, came as well."

"Carmilla..."

"And the demi-humans wanted to come too. It was quite difficult to convince them not to."

"Oh, you guys..."

"Do you have your answer?" Carmilla asked with a grin.

Lily's eyes widened.

Right. That's right. We're not related by blood. Nothing says we need to be together.

And yet, over the time they'd spent with each other, they'd definitely built a real connection.

"Logic has nothing to do with it," Carmilla said. "We are together because we want to be. And that is reason enough."

"You're right," Lily murmured, her eyes stinging. "You're right!"

Tears began to spill down the young elf's cheeks, dripping onto the floor. She wiped at them several times before continuing.

"Thank you, Carmilla. Um, I have a message for Zenos too. Please tell him I'm sorry, and to be careful."

"Is that all?"

"And...when we get back, I'll make the best dinner ever to celebrate."

"Heh heh. I will be certain to rush him, then." Grinning, Carmilla slipped through the window and leaped into the dark of night. "Until next time, Lily."

"Bye!" Lily exclaimed, raising her hand high and waving.

Strangely, the darkness before her no longer felt ominous or lonely. She rolled up her sleeves with newfound determination.

"Okay. I need to do what I can too!"

Chapter Three: Savior of the Front Lines

The next day, Zenos headed for the front lines—located several kilometers west of the fortress—along with several others. As they crossed over hills and passed through barren fields, the stench of blood and rot grew stronger.

"Ugh! This stinks."

"Man, I'd rather get killed by some guy than eaten by a magical beast..."

"Yeah, but if we survive we get enough coin to eat for a while."

The poor chatted to distract themselves from their fear, though the way some of them trembled violently as they clutched their weapons still made their terror obvious. Many of the items they'd been given were rusted, chipped, or corroded, making them barely functional.

"Hey, can't we get better gear?" Zenos asked the army officer leading the wagon.

"The equipment supplied from the royal capital is reserved for the army," the officer replied curtly. "General Higarth's orders. He said you lot could fight bare-handed, but Commander Tarque managed to secure you these old weapons instead."

"Sounds to me like your general doesn't care much about actually protecting the border."

"Not another word, unless you want to be in violation of military regulations."

Zenos shrugged and fell silent.

Eventually, they arrived in an area overlooked by wooden watchtowers, with long rows of sandbags arranged in a barrier. Wooden fencing was set up in front of the sandbags, forming an encampment capable of holding a substantial number of troops.

There were also tents here and there, likely meant for strategy meetings and brief periods of rest.

"What, we're supposed to fight off the beasts *here*?" one man muttered.

The soldier guiding them shook his head, his expression cold. He pointed down toward the river at the bottom of the hill. "This is the second line of defense. You lot will be stationed on the first line."

A wide bridge, capable of accommodating about ten grown men side by side, spanned the river. There, other poor people were already in position.

"What? You want us to fight down *there*?" the man asked. "There's no fences or anything!"

"Your job is to use your own bodies to keep the magical beasts from crossing over the bridge."

"Wait, but then why don't you just destroy the bridge? That way they can't cross."

"They prefer to cross the bridge so they don't get wet. But without one, they'd just swim across wherever. This creates a bottleneck that lets us control their movements and focus our defenses."

Of course, some beasts would still try to swim across, but previous data indicated roughly eighty percent of them would try to cross the bridge.

"If any beasts manage to break through the first line or swim across, the soldiers stationed at the second line will take care of them."

"So basically we have to hold off most of the beasts using trash for weapons?"

"That is General Higarth's strategy."

This is insane, Zenos thought with a sigh of disbelief as he stepped off the wagon. Higarth had been throwing around the words "shield" and "cannon fodder," but now it was obvious that he'd meant them quite literally.

"This is your position, Squad 38."

The poor had been divided into squads, each with ten people, and placed in order along the bridge. Zenos's squad was positioned

closest to the riverbank on the Herzeth side.

"Shit, that's lucky," a man said, sighing in mild relief. "The closer you are to the other side, the worse it is, right?"

Beyond the bridge, the barren landscape was sparsely dotted with trees. Further in the distance, a thick mist obscured visibility. That had to be the Yanul Marshlands—a so-called breeding ground for magical beasts. The group could feel a foul, ominous magical energy emanating from the marshlands; it was precisely the kind of environment magical beasts would thrive in. Naturally, the squads positioned closest to the marshlands would be the first line of defense, while those further away were in relatively safer positions.

"If a squad ahead of you gets wiped out, you move one position forward. Get it?" the soldier asked in an indifferent tone.

Everyone fell silent.

Zenos glanced at the others for a moment before turning to the soldier. "We don't know what's causing the beasts to attack yet, do we?"

"Commander Tarque is investigating the cause."

"Have these beasts ever attacked in groups like this before?"

"Strays sometimes wander in. Now keep your mouth shut."

"So a recent thing, then. What kind of beasts are attacking?"

The soldier's voice grew sharp. "I said to keep y—"

Before he could finish, however, the bronze gong near the watchtower rang out loudly.

"Horde incoming!"

The camp erupted into a frenzy as clouds of dust rose in the distance. The ground began to shake with mismatched footfalls, and deep, guttural growls filled the air.

"Th-They're actually coming...!" one of the squad members blurted out, his face pale with fear as he gripped his spear tightly.

The atmosphere went from vague concern to immediate, pressing terror. Zenos had hoped for a clearer view of the situation, but the poor on the bridge were in disarray. There was no coordination at all, just a mess of people raising their weapons haphazardly.

"They're comiiing!"

"Aaargh!"

"Excuse me. Coming through." Shouts rose from the squads closest to the camp as Zenos began to swiftly weave through the frightened crowd.

He headed straight into the fray as the swarm of magical beasts descended from the marshlands, heading straight for the squads and their feeble weapons.

Evil rabbits. Hungry dogs. Wild boars. About twenty beasts total. Zenos was familiar with all of them from his adventuring days.

"*Scalpel,*" Zenos chanted, conjuring a massive blade made of mana.

Boosting his strength and speed with enhancement magic, he cut down one beast after another in a matter of seconds. Blood splattered through the air, mingling with the beasts' dying cries, and within only a few minutes, the attack was over.

"Ah. I see," Zenos muttered, wiping the sweat from his brow. He turned to find the others staring at him, mouths agape.

"H-He saved us..."

"Dude, you're awesome..."

"The hell are you, man? Some famous warrior?"

"A nameless slum rat. Also, I'm not actually a front liner, so..." Zenos scratched his head.

Carmilla's voice rose from his pack. "This is odd indeed. What do you think?"

"They said this was a horde, but the types are all over the place, and most of them were pretty small beasts. Different species don't usually band together like this."

"Which means...?"

"I mean, do you need me to tell you? I'm sure the army's caught on by now too." Zenos narrowed his eyes, staring at the misty marshlands in the distance. "Someone's controlling these things."

***

The Yanul Marshlands were a vast wetland, shrouded in thick fog year-round. With limited sunlight and a damp, gloomy atmosphere, the area was rife with tainted magical energy—making it the perfect

breeding ground for magical beasts. No sane person would willingly step into it.

And yet, in the middle of that cursed land, a solid stone fortress had been built.

"Our enemy will catch on soon," said an old man in a gray robe as he looked over the beast-infested swamp.

Behind the robed man stood three figures, two male and one female.

"Catch on? You mean, they'll realize we're here?" asked one of the men, who had the pelt of a magical beast draped over his shoulders.

"Herzeth is supposedly known as the Kingdom of the Sun," said the robed old man in a raspy voice. "One would expect them to have at least some degree of clarity and a decent intelligence gathering system."

"The Kingdom of the Sun..."

The old man laughed, his shoulders shaking with amusement. "What arrogance to name themselves after the sun itself. But no matter. The stronger the light, the darker the shadows it casts. And dark shadows are perfect for assassins to lurk in unnoticed." He turned to the man in fur. "Zuey. Keep sending your forces out."

"Yes, sir. You want us to keep up the attack?"

"For a while longer, yes. According to our scouts, they have the poor guarding their front lines. Hardly a disciplined force. Truly, their arrogance is astounding. If we keep sending wave after wave of magical beasts, we should break through with ease."

"Then I will have my beast tamers continue with their preparations," Zuey said, turning to leave.

"Wait," the old man called out. "Speaking of which...what of Misery?"

Misery was a beast tamer and assassin that their group had sent to pose as an adventurer and infiltrate Herzeth. She'd been tasked with eliminating key adventurers of the kingdom—some of its most important assets—without drawing attention.

Zuey replied with a troubled frown, "We've lost contact with her."

"What?"

"Apparently, every time she attempts to do something questionable, the image of a strange woman comes to her mind, and she becomes paralyzed."

"What the...?"

Was it some kind of curse? Shamans, mages who specialized in curses, were even rarer than beast tamers. In the western continent, the last recorded use of the art had been during the Great Human-Demon War, three hundred years ago.

"We did receive a message from Misery before she disappeared," one of the others hesitantly said. "But...we've been hesitant to report it, since it's dubious at best."

"Speak."

"She said, 'There's someone outlandish in this country. Be careful.'"

The old man's lips curled into a grin. "Someone 'outlandish,' is it? Interesting. Let's see how long they'll last against the Ashen Harvest."

***

Meanwhile, inside a room in the fortress, Commander Melissa pushed to her feet after receiving a report from the intelligence unit.

"I knew beast tamers were behind this," she said, her expression grim.

A nearby soldier spoke up. "Beast taming is an unusual craft, isn't it? You really think beast tamers are involved?"

"Yes. Up until now, beasts only strayed from the marshlands alone or in small groups. Now that they're attacking in large packs, it seems obvious someone is pulling their strings."

"But how can anyone control that many beasts?"

"Well, that's why we suspect there are multiple beast tamers. A significant number of them, perhaps."

Even then, it took years of training in unique techniques to master beast taming—and innate talent. The soldier remained skeptical. "Gathering that many beast tamers would be a difficult feat."

"I had a potential lead regarding that, but now I've received confirmation." Melissa spoke slowly, deliberately. "Have you ever heard of the Ashen Harvest?"

"The Ashen Harvest..."

"Indeed. A nomadic tribe, originally from the western continent. They wandered from place to place, with no home of their own. To fend off wild magical beasts, they trained in strange arts. At some point, they pivoted into mercenary work and became a significant force in the western continent."

"Are you implying they're behind this?"

"Yes. And this report states that part of their forces have infiltrated this continent."

Melissa's subordinate turned pale. "What awful timing. We have enough trouble with Malavaar to the north, and now we have to fend off the Ashen Harvest in the west?"

"So it seems. Even worse—there's a possibility they're all in collusion."

The soldier stood there in startled silence as Melissa stared at a map hung on the wall.

"The northern front has been locked in a stalemate for a while, and out of nowhere, the Ashen Harvest strikes at us from the west? A coincidence is unlikely. I would imagine their goal is to thin out the western defenses with constant attacks, thus forcing us to seek reinforcements from the northern front."

"Which would leave the northern front vulnerable, allowing the empire to break through."

"That's right. I'll send word to the capital immediately, but we cannot significantly bolster our troops overnight. For now, we have to hold out with the army's current numbers."

Unfortunately, most of the army was stationed at the northern front, and the western defenses—largely made up of untrained poor people—were under the command of a power-hungry, incompetent buffoon from the capital.

Melissa gritted her teeth and clenched her fists. "Right now, this is the nation's main point of defense. We *will* hold this line, no

matter what.”

***

On the bridge at the first line of defense of the western border, Carmilla was musing inside her bracelet.

“So the magical beasts are being controlled,” came her voice from the bag on Zenos’s back. “That means beast tamers are behind this.” She paused, as if recalling a memory. “Come to think of it, I once heard of a mercenary group hailing from the west that specialized in beast taming and other such strange arts. Ashen Harvest, I think they were called.”

“Yeah? And how do you know about that?” Zenos asked.

Carmilla chuckled. “My age is not simply for show.”

“You’re full of weird, random knowledge.”

“Wait...haven’t we dealt with a beast tamer recently?”

“What’s on your mind?”

“Oh, nothing. Although...a mercenary group from the west may very well be working with the empire to the north.”

Under the blazing midday sun, Zenos roughly ruffled his hair in frustration. “Ugh, I’m sick of this!”

“What is with the sudden outburst? Has the sun fried your brain?”

“It’s damn well about to fry!” Zenos groaned, clutching his head before sitting down on the ground. “All I wanted was to take Lily back home! Why do things have to get complicated?! Come ooon!”

First, he’d had to commit to bringing back not just Lily, but a boy from one of the seven great noble houses—Albert Baycladd’s younger brother, no less—too. And as if that weren’t trouble enough, he’d been thrown onto the front lines, and no sooner had he thought maybe all he’d have to do was fend off some magical beasts, he’d discovered there was some weird mercenary group involved!

And to make matters worse, that group could be working with the Malavaar Empire!

“I have a clinic to run! And a school! Why can’t I catch a single break?! I’m just a backwater healer, damn it!”

“And little did the enemy know that this backwater healer was

about to become their greatest nightmare...”

“What was that?”

“Nothing. So, what is the plan? According to Lily, that noble boy refuses to go home without some sort of outstanding military merit.”

“Great. So he wants merits,” Zenos muttered. He heaved a deep sigh, glaring resentfully at the sun. “With no war, there wouldn’t be any merits to earn, right?”

“Heh...I suppose not,” Carmilla conceded, amused.

Zenos slowly pushed to his feet.

“Fine. We’ll just have to make the war go away, then.”

***

At the heart of the capital, within a parlor frequented by high nobility, a pair of men were engrossed in a game of chess.

“The Ashen Harvest?” asked the handsome Albert Baycladd, studying the board. “I’ve heard stories about them.”

Reports from the battlefield had already reached the seven great noble houses. The Ashen Harvest, a mercenary group once feared across the western continent, was allegedly involved in the recent attacks by magical beasts.

“Whether they’re acting under Malavaarian orders or not is still unclear,” said the other man, Lord Giesz.

“Either way, this is bigger than simple beasts wandering in from the marshlands. Perhaps it’s a sign of the saintess’s prophecy unfolding.”

“I pray that it isn’t,” Lord Giesz said, crossing his arms and directing his sharp, calculating gaze to the board before him.

Albert moved one of the pieces forward. “And what of the prospect of reinforcing the western front?”

“It’s being discussed, but it won’t be easy. The Western Defensive Line was built to repel stray beasts, nothing more. It was never designed to hold a large military force. And most importantly, if the empire is indeed colluding with the Ashen Harvest, weakening the northern front would be reckless.”

“And deploying the Capital Defense Corps isn’t an option either, I

imagine, since we don't yet know the true nature of the prophecy and cannot risk leaving the capital unprotected."

"You imagine correctly." Lord Giesz moved a piece of his own, reinforcing the king's defenses.

Albert's hand stilled, and he straightened his posture slightly. "By the way, Lord Giesz, I hear Rubel is currently at the Western Defensive Line, under your care."

"Rubel?"

"My youngest brother."

"Oh? Your brother is on the battlefield?"

Lord Giesz's expression remained unchanged, but there was no doubt he'd already known. In political negotiations between the powerful, revealing nothing was essential. And in that regard, few could match the seven great noble houses—who had been entangled in courtly power struggles for generations—in acuity.

"Indeed. It would appear he forced his way onto a war-bound carriage. I imagine he's been quite the nuisance. By all means, feel free to send him home anytime."

"If that is true, it's quite a serious matter. I shall have it investigated promptly."

"And if your investigation confirms the information, you will have him returned?"

"It's a battlefield. One can never know where a bad-faith actor might be lurking. I will assess the situation and give further instructions accordingly."

Unsurprisingly, Lord Giesz had no intention of easily letting go of such a valuable bargaining chip.

"Conversely, were the conflict in the west to be resolved, there would be no need to keep Rubel under protective custody at the fortress, correct?"

Lord Giesz paused. He moved another piece forward, then spoke in a quiet tone. "Correct. And incidentally, *future* Lord Baycladd, I wished to speak to you about the nearly concluded negotiations regarding the rights to the Balmitt Sea—"

"I will need to consult my father, of course, but depending on the terms, I may be able to arrange the transfer of those rights to House

Giesz. We do, after all, owe you for keeping Rubel safe."

"How unexpectedly reasonable of you. And what would your half of the terms be?" Lord Giesz asked with a small smile.

Albert smiled in turn. "Shall we make a wager, Lord Giesz?"

"A wager?"

"Indeed. Let us wager on whether the conflict in the west will be settled within a month's time. The winner gets the rights to the territory."

"Hmph. You want to wager on that even knowing that the Ashen Harvest is involved? The odds would be overwhelmingly skewed. There is simply no chance that this conflict ends within a month."

"Then you shall bet on that. My bet will be that it *will* end within a month."

"Oh...?" Lord Giesz raised an eyebrow. "That's unsettling, coming from you. But you don't have a trump card like the Sword Saint hidden in your sleeve this time, do you? Or do you have some secret plan I'm not aware of?"

"A plan? Hardly. I have no authority over the military, after all."

Albert gave a small, resigned shrug. Then he casually took a pawn and weaved it through the other king's defenses.

"I'm simply betting on a nameless hero."

***

A battlefield is a place of combat—and fighting inevitably means sustaining injuries big and small.

Behind the second line of defense of the Western Defensive Line was a medical tent to handle such injured individuals. It was there that, on this particular day, an intermediate-level healer named Grace Habott witnessed something unbelievable.

The western border had originally been relatively peaceful, with the troops stationed there mainly dealing with occasional stray magical beasts wandering in from the Yanul Marshlands. Grace's duties as a healer had largely consisted of health consultations for the border patrol officers; actual injuries had only occurred a few times a month. She'd been able to take it easy. Many military healers

wished to be stationed at the northern front instead, where battles were fierce. But for Grace, who preferred a quiet life away from the bustle of the royal capital, this place had been ideal.

That was until the past ten days, when relentless attacks by magical beasts had brought with them an endless stream of wounded, leaving no time for rest. And unlike the northern front, which boasted medical units led by advanced healers, the Western Defensive Life had scarcely any competent ones on hand. Reinforcements had been sent from the royal capital, but the newly appointed commanding officer, General Higarth, had stationed those healers at the fortress, claiming that if they went to the front lines and died, there'd be nobody left to tend to him if he got injured.

As a result, Grace was the singular healer in the medical tent. Not only did that leave them without enough healers, but there also weren't enough nurses, painkillers, or bandages—and the number of wounded continued to snowball. With her indigo hair tied in a disheveled ponytail, Grace was running herself ragged, practically dragging herself around the tent to treat the injured. The situation showed no signs of improvement.

A soldier on the verge of death lay before her, his life flickering like a candle in the wind.

"D-Doctor," he murmured hoarsely. "I'll...make it, right?"

Grace nodded firmly. "Y-Yes, of course. *Heal.*"

She placed a hand over the deep wound in the man's side and cast a healing spell—but she was fully aware that this was for peace of mind and nothing more. The wound was large and deep, and with Grace's mana nearly depleted from days of continuous healing, repairing the deeper tissue was an impossible ask.

Everywhere around her, pained groans for help—the groans of friends with whom she'd been laughing only days ago—echoed as life after life slipped through her fingers. One of them had even asked for her help in choosing a name for his soon-to-be-born child.

Tears welled at the corners of Grace's eyes as she clenched her fists. *I'm powerless,* she thought.

"Is this the medical tent?"

At that moment, a man in a black cloak walked into the hellish

tent. His tone was oddly relaxed, entirely at odds with the tense atmosphere.

"Who the hell are you?" asked a soldier on guard, confronting the suspicious man. "Are you with the poor? This is a medical tent for military personnel only. The likes of you are not allowed here. Get back to where you belong!"

But the man remained unfazed. In a calm tone, he said, "Look, I just want to ask something. This is where regular soldiers come for treatment, right? But where are you treating the poor? I don't plan on letting anyone in my squad get hurt, but there are a lot of people down at the first line of defense. Injuries are bound to happen in the other squads. We need a place where we can round up the injured for treatment."

Grace listened to the slum dweller's words in a daze.

If the official army stationed at the second line of defense was in this dire a state, then the situation of the poor, forced to act as human shields at the first line, had to be catastrophic. Commander Tarque, when she was still in charge, had ordered that the poor should receive treatment as well. But after General Higarth had taken over, he'd dismissed those people as disposable and refused to send them aid.

Grace had been planning to head to the first line after things settled down in the second, but the reality was that she was barely managing here as it was.

But...had the cloaked man just said something about not letting anyone in his squad get hurt? What had he meant by that?

The soldier in charge of guarding the tent kept his patronizing tone as he raised his voice. "Huh? You all can just lie down by the riverside under the bridge if you get hurt."

"That's not a good solution. It's not sanitary, first of all, and the smell of blood will attract magical beasts, which would then cross the river and attack the wounded. That'd just be more trouble for you guys in the long run. And eventually, those beasts are gonna find their way here to the second line."

"Sh-Shut up! Who do you think you are?!"

"Nobody. Just a plain ol' healer."

"D-Don't be ridiculous! A healer from the slums?!"

"A...healer?" Grace murmured, pushing to her feet. "H-Hey! Did you say you're a healer?!"

The man's gaze shifted to Grace. His appearance was far from refined, but his eyes were clear and steady. He gave her a small nod. "More or less. Though not officially."

Grace wasn't sure what he meant by that, but in a situation like this, she couldn't care less whether or not he was "officially" a healer. She would take anyone who could cast healing magic at this point.

She staggered toward him and clutched his black cloak. "C-Can you help us?!"

The soldier, flustered, tried to intervene. "Dr. Habott, you can't make that call. The general will have my neck—"

"Then *you* stop their bleeding right now! Oh, you can't, can you?!" she shouted, surprising even herself with how her usually soft voice came out. But it didn't matter; people were dying!

"B-But..."

"I don't mind helping," the black-cloaked man interjected calmly. "But I have one condition."

"A condition?"

"Expand this tent so the poor can use it too. This isn't the time to split people up based on their station. Treating them all in one place is much more efficient."

"V-Very well."

"Dr. Habott, this is a bad idea," the soldier cautioned. "And the poor are—"

"That doesn't matter right now!" Grace and the cloaked man shouted in unison.

The soldier stood there at a loss for words for a moment before awkwardly clearing his throat. "F-Fine. I'll consider it."

With that, the treatments began.

"My name is Grace Habott," Grace said as she led the man through the tent. "I'm an intermediate healer. And you?"

"Zenos."

"The severely injured are at the front, and those with smaller

injuries are in the back. I need you to handle the moderately injured."

But Zenos stopped where he was, pointing to an area of the tent with several wounded lying on their side. "No. Those people there are about to die. They should get priority."

"Oh, that area..."

That part of the tent was where the most critically injured, with the lowest chances of survival, had been placed. With the medical tent as strapped as it was for resources, making difficult choices was unavoidable.

The man Grace had been tending to earlier was in that section as well. His breathing was faint, his life hanging by a thread. But all she could do for him and the others in that section was offer words of comfort and palliative care, as she had earlier.

Grace bit her lip in frustration, and Zenos gave her a puzzled look. "Listen, I get that you need to prioritize, but those guys aren't beyond saving. Let's hurry and help them."

It was Grace's turn to look at Zenos in confusion. "What? A-Are you really a healer?"

"That's what I said, yeah. Though not officially."

"Then you should be able to tell at a glance how difficult it would be to save them!"

"I'm not saying it's *easy*, but just because it's difficult doesn't mean they're not worth saving."

Grace clenched her fists and raised her voice. "D-Don't act like you know what it's like! I want to save them! I do, but—"

"*High Heal,*" Zenos chanted, raising his right hand over one of the injured soldiers.

A flood of warm white light enveloped the wounded man's side, almost like a gentle bandage. The light swirled with a radiant glow, scattering a mist of pure-white particles into the air. In an instant, blood vessels, nerves, muscles, and skin tissue began to regenerate.

"Huh...?"

Right before Grace's disbelieving eyes, even the man's lost organs were restored from the inside out. The soldier, who had been moments away from death, fell into a peaceful sleep. His breaths

were quiet and steady.

"All done."

"Um. Huh? What?"

"You were right about this being a difficult case, though. He's lost a lot of blood and needs to rest for a while. Can we set up another tent next to this one? Separate the treatment area from the recovery area?"

"Huh? Wait. Hold on..."

"Now then, on to the next—"

"Wait a second!" Grace yelled without thinking.

Zenos turned back to her with a small frown. "What? This is kind of urgent."

"Wh-Wh-Wh-Wh-What just happened?!"

"Hmm? I mean, you saw what happened. I healed him."

What Zenos had done had been so far beyond the capabilities of ordinary healing magic that even after having witnessed it with her own eyes, Grace still couldn't comprehend it. But he simply flicked back his black cloak and walked toward another injured soldier.

Grace hurried after him. "J-Just who *are* you?"

"I told you. Just a plain ol' healer."

"No 'plain ol' healer' could do that!"

"Come on. People need healing."

"Ah! W-Wait!"

The black-clad, dark-haired man rolled up his sleeves and moved swiftly through the tent. He pulled the critically injured back from the brink of death, sealed wounds that could've become fatal, and swiftly healed minor bumps, scratches, and bruises. His pure-white healing light, contrasting with the black of his cloak, filled the tent as it swirled and danced through the air.

Before anyone knew it, every single injured person in the medical tent had been completely healed by the hands of one man and one man alone.

Grace stood there, mouth agape in complete shock. "I... I can't believe this..."

She didn't think even the advanced healers at the northern front could pull off something like this. The mysterious healer had come

out of nowhere and saved countless lives from being dragged down into eternal sleep.

The faces of those she'd been unable to save due to her own helplessness flashed through Grace's mind. Her heart filled with a mix of relief and regret, the storm of emotions making tears roll down her cheeks.

"It's too soon to cry," Zenos said.

Grace gasped.

"More wounded will keep coming. Healers can't let emotions get in the way of their job. No matter how chaotic things get, at least one person has to stay calm and assess the situation from the rear."

"R-Right!" Grace exclaimed, instinctively straightening her posture.

"Not that I came up with those words, but you know," Zenos remarked, smiling. "Now then..." His gaze shifted toward the soldier guarding the tent. "You go expand the tent so the poor can get treated here too."

Like Grace, the soldier had been utterly captivated by Zenos's miraculous healing. But after a moment, he seemed to snap back to reality, shaking his head. "N-No, I can't do that."

"Wait a second!" Grace protested, stepping closer. "You promised!"

The soldier's tone became defiant. "I-I only said I'd *consider* it. I need the general's permission."

"There's no time to be fastidious right now! And Commander Tarque originally ordered that the poor should be treated too!"

"B-But General Higarth—"

"Hey! What the hell is your problem?!" came an interjection not from Grace or Zenos, but from one of the soldiers who'd been on death's door moments ago.

"You're seriously gonna break a promise to the guy who saved our lives?" another asked.

"Some knight you are! Do people from the capital not understand gratitude?!"

"Do you have any idea how many we're gonna lose if that guy leaves?"

"Y-You lot..."

Ignoring the stunned soldier in charge, the others slowly got up and bowed their heads to Zenos.

"Thank you. You saved us."

"Thanks to you, we don't have to say goodbye to our families just yet."

"We don't care who you are. We're in your debt."

"A soldier who doesn't repay a life debt is a disgrace."

As the soldiers approached, their shoulders squared, the guard swallowed hard. "F-Fine! Do whatever you want!"

Muttering under his breath, he backed away and left the tent.

"All right! Let's get started making this tent bigger!" a soldier said.

"Yeah!" another responded.

"We need to set up a route to carry the poor here."

"Got it!"

The soldiers who had been lightly injured took the lead in expanding the medical tent and setting up a new one for the recovering patients. Grace stood there, mouth slightly open in disbelief, watching them work.

"This place was a nightmare just a moment ago..." she murmured.

"With this, we should be able to hold the line," Zenos said with a serene expression.

The relentless magical beast attacks had worn down the soldiers. With no guarantee that reinforcements would arrive, their current priority was to prevent further losses. Those who'd had minor or moderate injuries could return to battle once fully healed. Those who'd been critically injured needed time to rest and recover their strength.

Zenos turned to Grace. "By the way, what's the food situation here?"

"Well, there are no cooking facilities here, so the kitchen staff prepares meals at the fortress and transport troops bring them here. Why?"

"Nutrition is important. It affects stamina and recovery, plus morale too. The poor at the first line of defense got nothing but a

single, rock-hard piece of dry bread. What do you think that's done to their spirits?"

"W-Well, I understand, it's just..."

That, too, had likely been one of General Higarth's orders.

Grace grimaced at the thought of the overweight, slovenly general. "As their healer, I should be making sure the soldiers are properly fed. But right now, we just don't have the resources..."

"Yeah. I get it."

With the expansion of the medical tent, large numbers of injured poor were expected to be brought in—just handling that was likely going to take up all of their resources.

Zenos looked up at the fortress standing atop the distant hill.

"Is something the matter?" Grace asked.

"No, it's nothing." Zenos slowly rolled his neck, then started walking toward the tent's entrance. "All right, then. Let's wait for the wounded. No one's dying on our watch."

"No one's dying on our watch."

This was a bloody battlefield. Such a thing should be impossible. Yet, for some reason, hearing Zenos say that, Grace found herself wanting to believe it. The Western Defensive Line was at its breaking point under the constant attacks. The number of injured continued to rise, and the soldiers' morale was wearing thin as the battle went on with no end in sight.

But now, for the first time, the light of hope peeked in through the clouds.

"Yes!" she exclaimed, more loudly than ever before, as she hurried after Zenos.

***

Meanwhile, at the fortress, two small figures were sneaking around in the food storage. One was Lily, an elven girl, and the other was Rubel, the third son of the prestigious House Baycladd—one of the seven great noble houses.

"Lord Rubel, why are you here?" asked General Higarth as he waddled toward the pair, his belly jiggling. He'd received a report

about the two children's actions. "Please return to your chambers."

Rubel gave Higarth a displeased scowl. "I won't. You can't keep me in that room forever. I demand to at least stretch my legs."

"But—"

"We're playing explorers," Lily interjected.

"Playing...explorers," Higarth echoed, bewildered.

The general sternly warned them not to go outside, then turned and headed back toward the command room.

"Damn it," Rubel groaned. "When do *I* finally get to go to the battlefield?" He turned his gaze toward Lily. "I'll have you know I'm only keeping you company out of boredom!"

"I know!" Lily replied enthusiastically. "Thanks, Rubel!"

The young elf had been the one to suggest "playing explorers" in the fortress. She'd seen Rubel sulking and told him staying in his room wouldn't change anything, then suggested doing something fun instead. The boy had initially grumbled about being treated like a child, but had nevertheless agreed—and even looked a little happy about it. Perhaps he didn't often have the chance to play with children his own age.

Lily and Rubel had wandered the hallways, climbed up and down stairs, before eventually discovering the underground food storage and sneaking inside. The elf had been secretly taking note of the available supplies as they roamed the storeroom.

"Let's go explore somewhere else, Lily," Rubel grumbled.

"Okay! I want to check out the kitchen," she replied.

"Ugh. Fine..."

Despite his complaints, Rubel followed along, and the two went to the kitchen located at the far end of the first floor. It was a spacious area with no decorations, packed with soldiers who seemed to be on cooking duty and various other kitchen staff.

A short-haired redhead was speaking sternly to a man who looked to be in charge of the kitchen.

"Why is more than half of the food stock reserved for the high-ranking officers?" she demanded. "There's no way they can eat all of that! Most of it is just going to rot!"

"Commander Tarque, ma'am, we feel the same way. But...it's an

order from General Higarth."

"And what do you mean, there are no rations for the poor fighting at the first line? They were supposed to be fed three times a day!"

"Well, the general said that leftovers are more than enough for the poor..."

Commander Tarque let out a deep sigh and brought a hand to her forehead. "Does the general not understand the situation? This isn't a peaceful place like the capital. If the first and second lines of defense go down, this fortress will be next!"

"Um..." Lily said, stepping forward and drawing everyone's attention.

The moment the soldiers noticed Rubel standing beside her, they hurriedly dropped to one knee.

"What brings you here, Lord Rubel?" asked the female commander, whom Lily had seen before. "This is no place for a noble child."

But Rubel just rubbed his nose. "We're exploring. What's it to you?"

"Well, we *are* in the middle of a conflict..."

"Oh! I just had a great idea!" Lily exclaimed, clapping her hands together. "Hey, Rubel, we should have a picnic in the courtyard!"

"A picnic?" Rubel asked.

"I'll make us food! It'll be so fun!"

"I didn't come here for a *picnic*," Rubel protested. "But...I guess we could, for a little bit."

He was still acting reluctant, but clearly he preferred Lily's suggestion over sitting idly in his room.

A vein visibly twitched on Commander Tarque's forehead. "Hey. I don't know what your relationship to Lord Rubel is, but this is not the time for leisure picni—"

"But I'm not a very good cook," Lily continued. "I might waste a lot of food trying to get it just right."

The commander's eyes widened.

Lily turned to the kitchen manager, speaking in an innocent tone. "Since Rubel is a *very* important noble, he'll eat from the food reserved for the high-ranking officers, right? It looks like there's lots

of it, so it’s okay to waste a little, right?”

Melissa let out a chuckle and placed her hands on her hips. “Pfft... Yes, you’re absolutely right. We must prepare a feast suitable for Lord Rubel’s refined tastes. Naturally, this means discarding any unfit ingredients in the process.”

The kitchen staff immediately sprang into action. “Yes, ma’am!”

Any discarded luxury food items meant for high-ranking officers would technically be classified as leftovers. And since the general had ordered that the poor should only eat leftovers, there was now a supply of food for them.

Melissa watched Lily with an impressed expression. “You’ve found yourself a fine friend, Lord Rubel.”

“You think so?” Rubel asked, seemingly not grasping what had just transpired. He rubbed his nose in slight embarrassment. “I-I guess, yes.”

Lily puffed up her chest with enthusiasm and declared to no one in particular, “All right! I’ll whip up something great! Just you wait!”


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The food from the fortress's kitchen was soon transported to the front lines. At the medical tent, where the wounded were recovering from treatment, the newly arrived meals were a big hit.

"Th-This is so good!"

"What the heck?"

"This is nothing like what we got before!"

Both the poor and the soldiers inside the tent groaned with disbelieving delight as they scarfed down their rations, which were clearly of finer quality than before.

"What the...?" Grace murmured as she bit into a rice ball. She glanced at the healer beside her. "You look oddly pleased, Zenos."

"Yeah. This tastes familiar, is all."

Grace tilted her head, confused, but Zenos simply grinned, seemingly in high spirits.

"All right, time for us to get serious too. We have a score to settle with the Ashen Harvest."

Chapter Four: Counterattack and a Change in Personnel

Deep in the Yanul Marshlands stood a stone fortress that served as the headquarters for the Ashen Harvest. Originally a nomadic group, they had spent years studying ways to tame magical beasts to protect themselves from attacks. As a result, the Ashen Harvest boasted a significant number of beast tamers.

Atop the fortress's roof stood an old man, his back turned to another.

"Chief," said the other man, who had a magical beast's pelt draped over his shoulder, as he knelt. "I have a report on the battle."

"Have the kingdom's forces reached their limit yet?" the old man asked.

Magical beasts rarely formed packs outside of very specific situations. Even seasoned adventurers were unlikely to have experienced relentless organized attacks from such an overwhelming number of the creatures; the army would've been far less prepared. By now, the soldiers should be exhausted, and their casualties should be piling up.

"If they do nothing, the western border will be torn apart by the beasts. But if they mobilize their main forces, the Malavaar Empire will seize the opportunity and strike from the north. Hah! They have no options whatsoever," the old man said, chuckling darkly.

But his subordinate's report wasn't as expected. "Chief, we...did have the upper hand at one point, but it seems the enemy has been stabilizing rapidly."

"Oh?" The chief raised an eyebrow slightly. "Have reinforcements arrived?"

That wouldn't be an issue. They could simply continue to send beasts, causing even more casualties. After all, the Yanul Marshlands

had a near-endless supply of creatures they could use as pawns. It was a matter of time before the kingdom was forced to move troops from the northern front.

"If so, our contract should be fulfilled without issue," the chief concluded.

"No, there don't seem to be any reinforcements."

"What are you talking about, Zuey?" the old man asked, turning to look at his subordinate for the first time.

Still on one knee, Zuey continued, "The frontline soldiers were in complete disarray until recently. But over the past few days, their coordination has improved dramatically, and we haven't been able to defeat them."

The chief didn't respond.

Every soldier in the kingdom's first line of defense was supposedly part of the lowest class of citizens, and had been thrown there to act as a human barrier. They lacked the will and the weapons to defend their country. They hadn't even been trained in group tactics.

"How is this possible?" the chief asked finally.

"We don't know yet. And there's another matter—the wounded soldiers are returning to the battlefield far too quickly."

Those with minor injuries were returning almost immediately, and even the critically wounded were somehow making full recoveries within days.

"And this is reliable information?"

"Yes. Perhaps a team of healers has been sent to support them?"

"That's absurd. Even if that were the case, there's no such thing as a soldier recovering from a life-threatening injury and returning to battle within days."

The Kingdom of Herzeth *did* have a history of success in continental warfare, largely due to its abundance of skilled healers, who had thus gained somewhat privileged positions in the nation's society. And among that group, there *were* elite healers capable of performing extraordinary feats such as healing severe injuries instantly. But that still didn't explain what was happening now.

"One or two gravely injured soldiers making a full recovery would be one thing," the chief mused.

However, this was a battlefield. It wasn't a handful of soldiers sustaining critical injuries at a time, but dozens—perhaps even hundreds. Plus, there were fewer than ten elite healers in all of the kingdom. Magic had its limits, and even these exceptional healers wouldn't be able to treat that many wounded soldiers day after day.

"You're *sure* there isn't a mistake? That it's the exact same soldiers making a comeback?" the chief pressed.

"We've admittedly only observed from a distance, so the accuracy of the information is dodgy at best..."

The chief stood in contemplative silence. Even if the claim that mortally wounded soldiers were returning within days was exaggerated, the possibility that a large healer unit had joined the fray couldn't be ruled out. If this continued, the battle could stagnate into a standstill.

Stroking the deep wrinkles of his cheek, the chief let out a raspy laugh. "Well, it's no matter. We are the Ashen Harvest, after all. We're feared across the western continent for a reason. And we still have plenty of tricks up our sleeves to teach these fools how to wage war."

***

Several days later, Commander Melissa Tarque traveled from the fortress to the second line of defense.

"Ah, Zenos. You're still in one piece," she said as she spotted the healer standing near the medical tent.

"Mostly," he replied.

Melissa dismounted her horse and approached him. "Why are you here, by the way? I thought the poor were all supposed to be down at the first line?"

"Kind of a long story..."

She gave him a suspicious look, but it faded quickly as she seemed to remember something and pressed her lips together. "Well, first of all, I owe you an apology. I got caught up in investigations and paperwork, and it delayed my arrival here."

"Oh, don't sweat it."

"This magical beast attack doesn't seem incidental. There's a high chance that a group of suspicious mercenaries from the western continent, the Ashen Harvest, are behind it. Have you heard about this?"

"Sort of, yeah. Carmi—uh, headquarters said something about that."

"I see," Melissa said with a nod. She clenched her fists with frustration. "Since it's possible that the Ashen Harvest is behind this, we can't continue on with our current strategy. I tried petitioning General Higarth to restructure the first line's defenses, but all that did was make him scold me for 'questioning a superior' and dismiss me outright."

"The guy with the gut? Do we really need to listen to him at this point? Why can't you just take back command?"

Melissa faltered for a moment at Zenos's bluntness, then slowly shook her head. "A break in the chain of command will only lead to chaos. And if we lose our discipline, the army will collapse. That's what we've been taught."

"Huh..."

She sighed deeply, then gritted her teeth. "I'm sorry things have reached this point. At the very least, we managed to get the food situation sorted out."

"So that was you? It really helped."

In contrast with Zenos's casual tone, Melissa bitterly lowered her gaze. "It's a small comfort, nothing more. The first line of defense is probably in a dreary sta—"

Melissa stopped mid-sentence and looked around, puzzled.

"Things are...strangely calm here."

Now that she thought about it, there was no stench of blood or decay in the air. No groans or screams of agony. Even the soldiers who had looked utterly spent and demoralized days ago no longer seemed to be on the verge of collapse.

"What happened? Have the attacks stopped?" she asked.

"Nope," Zenos replied. "They're still coming one after the other."

"Then how—"

"Horde incoming!"

An alarm bell rose from the first line of defense. In an instant, the soldiers—who had been somewhat relaxed until moments ago—moved into formation. Their expressions, instead of displaying the despair of people headed for certain death, showed a burning sense of duty and purpose.

"What the...? What is going on here?" Melissa blurted out.

Zenos pointed toward the first line with a thumb. "Feel like taking a tour?"

***

At the first line of defense—an area directly facing the Yanul Marshlands that served as the foremost barrier against invading magical beasts—Commander Melissa Tarque stared in awe at the situation unfolding before her.

"What is the meaning of this?" she asked.

The alarm bell from the nearby watchtower rang continuously, warning of oncoming beasts. Thick clouds of dust rose in the distance as a swarm of small creatures growled ferociously, surging toward the bridge—which had been built to serve as a bottleneck.

That wasn't unusual.

What *was* unusual was that the poor, who had initially been positioned at the front of the bridge to act as a barricade, had left their posts. They were now arranged behind the rows of sandbags stacked across the bridge's midpoint.

"It's a swarm of needle rabbits," came a voice from the watchtower, broadcasted through a magical loudspeaker. "Formation five!"

"Formation five?" Melissa echoed, confused.

Immediately, the soldiers made their move. Archers and mages stationed at the tower near the bridge unleashed a barrage of arrows and long-range spells from their elevated positions toward the enemies below.

"Gah!"

"Grah!"

About half of the charging beasts immediately fell to the

onslaught of ranged attacks.

"Charge!"

Once the long-range assault ceased, the poor moved from their positions behind the sandbags and formed squads of several people each, then launched forward. At the vanguard were individuals clad in armor, wielding large shields—they were actual soldiers, not the poor, shockingly. These soldiers formed a horizontal line, halting the beasts' advance; meanwhile, the poor fighters in each squad thrust long spears through the gaps between the shield bearers, systematically taking down the beasts. They, too, were wearing military-grade protective gear.

"Sixty percent down! Squad 13, shift north!"

Orders continued to be issued from the watchtower, and gradually, the swarm was pushed back.

"Eighty percent! Finish them off!"

"Sir!"

To finish off the weakened beasts, sword-wielding soldiers rushed out from the bridge's rear, swiftly cutting down the remaining creatures. These soldiers, who at the start had been on standby to prevent any beasts that broke through the formation from crossing the bridge, worked alongside the poor during the final stretch to fully exterminate the beasts.

"That's a hundred percent! The beasts have been wiped out! All personnel, return to your posts!"

"Sir!"

Through flawless coordination, the swarm had been annihilated less than half an hour from the moment the first alarm bell rang out.

Another unit quickly moved in to dump the carcasses into the river, clearing the ground for the next round of defense. There seemed to be very few wounded; they were swiftly placed on stretchers and carried to the rear by what appeared to be a group of medics.

"Wh-What is happening here?" Melissa stammered. She stood frozen in place, bewildered by the orderly strategy.

Zenos raised a hand to shield his eyes from the sunlight. "Well, we figured it was better for everyone to work together instead of

piecemeal."

"No, but..."

That was precisely the problem—things weren't supposed to be that simple. Melissa had believed that cooperation between the poor and the regular army would be difficult, if not outright impossible. The poor were not used to following orders, and most soldiers saw them as disposable fodder. And yet, here they were: soldiers at the front, shielding the line of poor—who, in turn, had been furnished with military-grade weapons and armor. And they were all working in tandem under a single voice of command to exterminate the magical beasts.

"I... I can't believe this..." Melissa muttered.

"You just saw it happen," Zenos pointed out.

"Y-Yes, I suppose," she conceded. "Are the other defensive outposts operating the same way?"

"Yeah. I hear they've all adopted this strategy."

"You've only been here for a week! What kind of sorcery is this?" Melissa blurted out, taking an unconscious step toward Zenos.

"I didn't do anything. The soldiers started working together all on their own."

"The poor and the army *voluntarily* started working together? Now I believe it even less!"

"Is that so surprising? They're living under the same roof, eating from the same pot. Seems obvious to me they'd get along."

Melissa blinked in confusion as Zenos pointed toward the rear.

"Come on. Time to see the medics in action. Let's head back to the medical tent."

As dusk began to settle over the battlefield, dinner was being served near the medical tent behind the second line of defense. Soldiers were getting improved rations and happily savoring their meals. A large pot of soup was being reheated over a fire manastone, filling the air with an appetizing aroma.

"U-Unbelievable..."

To Melissa's further astonishment, the soldiers and the poor were sitting together in circles and making merry. Laughter rang out from all around them, despite their proximity to the front lines.

"It's all this man's doing, Commander," said Grace, the only healer on the front lines, spreading her arms wide.

"I told you, I didn't do anything," Zenos pointed out.

"You did!" Grace insisted. "Since you arrived, we haven't lost a single life!"

"What?" Melissa said, her eyes widening with shock. "Not a *single* casualty?" How was that possible?

Soldiers began to gather around Zenos.

"Hey, Dr. Zenos! This fried fish is great! Try some!" one offered.

"Sure," Zenos replied. "Thanks."

"These are dried yams from back home," another said. "They're good field rations. Here, take some."

"Appreciate it."

"This is the best cut of meat," another spoke up. "Me and the guys want you to have it, doctor."

"Um, I'm a bit full here. Besides, it's you all out there, risking your lives. You should get the best parts," Zenos said with an awkward smile.

Melissa stared at him intently. "Seriously, Zenos, who *are* you?"

"A plain ol' backwater healer."

"A-A healer?" she echoed. "Not a fighter?"

"I never said I was a fighter..."

"Listen, listen!" Grace cut in suddenly, leaning forward with her entire body, her words sounding a little slurred. "Zenos is the *best*!"

"Grace, are you drunk?"

Grace launched into an animated retelling, complete with wild gesturing, of how the medical tent had been a scene straight out of hell, of how Zenos had suddenly appeared and healed the wounded in an instant, and of how he'd demanded to treat soldiers and poor alike in a single place.

"He was sooo cool," Grace continued. "I've never seen healing magic like that before! Whew!"

"You *must* be drunk..."

"I get drunk just thinking back on it!"

Shortly after the soldiers and the poor had started getting treated in the same location, they'd begun to bond over their shared life-

and-death battles. A separate tent had been set up for those needing to recuperate, which naturally further fostered interaction, and soon a sense of camaraderie had begun to form.

"And...that's how they could coordinate so well," Melissa muttered.

"Yeah, pretty much," Zenos said.

"See? It's all thanks to Zenos! The Western Defensive Line is rock solid now! We're not gonna go down so easily! We've got this, Commander!" Grace exclaimed, thrusting her fist into the air.

"That's right, Commander! We're gonna show them what we're made of!" a soldier agreed.

"Hell yeah! I dunno who the Assin' Harvest or whatever are, but they're gonna eat dirt!"

"You mean *Ashen* Harvest?"

The soldiers all cheered in unison.

Despite the dire situation—few resources, no proper reinforcements, and a harsh future looming ahead—the atmosphere had begun to change, all thanks to the arrival of just one man.

"Yes," Melissa agreed with a firm nod. "You're right."

Shortly after, a soldier from the Capital Defense Corps—who were stationed at the fortress—walked into the medical tent. He walked straight over to the commander and handed her a piece of paper.

"Orders from General Higarth."

"From the general?" Melissa asked. She unfolded the paper, and her expression froze with shock.

"What is it?" Zenos asked.

Melissa gripped the paper tightly. "I'm being demoted."

***

Night fell upon the land. The hilltop fortress was shrouded in darkness, its soldiers on edge as they braced for potential nighttime attacks. Yet, in the officers' dining hall on the top floor, the atmosphere was leisurely and relaxed.

"Geh heh... Geh heh heh heh..."

General Higarth let out a satisfied chuckle as he savored the roast

lamb before him. Not only was he eating his favorite dish, but he'd also successfully demoted that nuisance of a commander. Melissa had outwardly followed orders, but he'd been able to tell from the start that she'd never truly accept his leadership. She'd constantly proposed changes to the frontline operations and strategies—clear signs of her dissatisfaction. No doubt that was the reason behind the subtle resentment he sensed from the rest of the Western Defense Corps, which she'd once led.

On top of that, she'd had the *audacity* to suggest a slum rat become an associate of hers, and worse, she'd been sending the high-ranking officers' rations—*his* rations!—to the front lines as "leftovers." What impudence.

"Who cares if she's supposedly a hero at the northern front? This will teach her to defy me. Geh heh heh!"

Higarth had climbed his way to the top of the Capital Defense Corps by trampling on his countless rivals and flattering his superiors. This was simply yet another threat to his authority that he'd shoved out of the way.

What a waste, sending valuable food to the front lines as scraps for that scum, he thought to himself as he stuffed another chunk of meat into his mouth, his metal utensils clinking unpleasantly in the process. Chewing noisily, he glared bitterly ahead. *Damn them.*

Sitting across the table from him was Rubel Baycladd, the third son of House Baycladd—the most prominent among the seven great noble houses.

"The meat here is a bit tough," the boy commented, dabbing at his lips with a napkin. "Lily's lunch earlier was much tastier."

Lily, a young elf who was seated next to Rubel, smiled brightly. "Hee hee! Thank you! But I think this is tasty too!"

Apparently, these two brats had thrown away a large portion of the high-ranking officers' rations just to make food for a picnic. But, of course, Higarth couldn't exactly complain about the behavior of a member of one of the seven great houses. Though he wasn't sure who this elf girl was, if she was a friend of Rubel's, she had to be of noble lineage. Perhaps she was connected to the royal family of the elven kingdom located in the Great Woods to the north. Regardless,

he couldn't risk embarrassing himself by rudely asking who she was, so he treated her with the same deference as he did Rubel, just to be safe.

"Hey, where'd that lady go? Did you fire her?" the young elf asked.

"That lady?" Higarth echoed. "Oh, you speak of *former* Commander Melissa. Well, it's unwise to leave someone incompetent in an important position."

"Incompetent? She didn't look incompetent."

"Bah ha ha! You're still a child, so you wouldn't understand."

"But with that lady gone, who's leading the front lines?"

Stupid brat acting like she knows something, Higarth grumbled internally. He managed to keep the irritation off his face as he wiped his mouth with his sleeve before answering, "*I* have set a brilliant strategy in motion. There is nothing to worry about."

"What strategy?" Rubel asked.

Little pests...

Though he was exasperated with the pair, Higarth saw no harm in flaunting his brilliance to a noble of one of the seven great houses. He adjusted himself in his chair, as he'd begun to slip, before speaking.

"The key to defending the western border is preventing the magical beasts from the Yanul Marshlands from breaching our kingdom. To that end, I have prepared a barricade."

"What kind of barricade?"

"The poor," Higarth declared. He flicked a carrot off his plate into the corner of the room—he'd *specifically* ordered no vegetables. That cook was getting fired. "Those vermin crawl in the shadows of our capital like maggots. All we need to do is round them up and throw them at the beasts. That halts the beasts' advance while doubling as pest control. And when they die on the battlefield, we won't have to pay them. Forget two birds with one stone—this kills *three* birds with one stone. Brilliant, I know. Geh heh heh!"

The elf girl beside Rubel seemed to furrow her brow for a moment. A trick of the light, surely. She must have been struck speechless by the sheer genius of his plan.

Higarth only had to endure this battlefield for three months before they sent someone else to succeed him. By then, he would have both prevented a magical beast invasion and culled the number of poor. With such impressive achievements, his next promotion was all but guaranteed.

"But how am I supposed to prove myself in combat like this?" Rubel asked.

Higarth cleared his throat. "Well, we will...determine that once we've assessed the situation in the field and found an appropriate opportunity for your distinguished efforts."

"You keep saying that! How long must I wait?! If I'm not allowed on the front lines, then what was the point of me coming here?!"

"W-Well..."

In truth, Rubel was a valuable asset—one who had willingly walked into the military's grasp. Lord Giesz had specifically instructed Higarth to keep the boy stationed at the fortress until certain negotiations with House Baycladd were complete. If Rubel grew upset and decided to leave, Higarth would be in serious trouble. He had no choice but to appease the boy and stall for time; this whole situation had become a major source of stress for the general.

At that moment, one of Higarth's direct subordinates walked into the dining hall and approached him. "General, a moment?"

"What is it? Can't you see I'm in the middle of a meal? You can just tell me here, if it's so important!"

"Yes, sir! My apologies, sir!" The man lowered his head. "I have news from the front lines."

"Oh? Did that woman burst into tears at her demotion? Geh heh heh!"

"She was dejected, sir. But...I am here to report concerning developments."

"What concerning developments?"

"The poor who were supposed to be acting as human shields at the first line of defense are now using the medical tent at the second line," the soldier reported, standing at attention. "They've also been equipped with military weapons and armor, and are eating meals alongside the soldiers."

"Whaaat?!" Higarth exclaimed. His hand froze, his fork suspended in midair. "I *specifically* ordered the poor to be used as fodder! Hierarchy is everything in the military! Coddling the dregs of society will only disrupt discipline! Who authorized this travesty?!"

"Apparently, the soldiers are doing it of their own volition, sir."

"Preposterous!"

Higarth slammed a fist against the table, his breath coming out in heavy snorts. Soldiers were nothing more than pieces on a chessboard. They had no right to act without being commanded. This was unthinkable! Unacceptable!

Is that woman meddling again?!

"Your orders, general?" the soldier asked.

"Tsk! I see I have no choice but to personally visit the front lines and restore order myself. I will leave tomorrow," Higarth snarled, a vein bulging on his forehead as he spoke. He glanced at the young noble. "Care to join me, Lord Rubel?"

"Really?!" Rubel asked, nodding excitedly. "I'll go!"

Higarth was growing tired of constantly smoothing over Rubel's demands to be taken to the front. He figured that, if he brought the boy along and allowed Rubel to watch from a distance, that should be enough.

Besides, though Rubel was only a third son, he was still a direct descendant of the leading house among the seven greats. House Giesz was in charge of the military presently, but one day, command would rotate back to House Baycladd. When that happened, it would be advantageous for Higarth to have Rubel's favor.

Knowing when, how, and whom to bow to was the most critical skill for getting ahead in the military.

"Lord Rubel, in exchange for fulfilling your request, I ask that you be sure to inform your father and elder brothers of my exceptional service. Geh heh heh!" Higarth flashed a sycophantic smile.

***

Meanwhile, atop a small hill near the second line of defense, two figures were seated by a campfire. The half-moon quietly watched

over the world, nestled in its shroud of darkness.

"I'm sorry, Zenos."

Melissa, now demoted from commander to a mere food supply transport officer, listlessly tossed a branch into the campfire and slumped her shoulders. "What you did on the front lines was a great feat. My original plan was to take you into my direct service and grant you unrestricted access to the fortress, as you requested. But now...I don't have that authority anymore."

The wind swept over the hill, and the flickering flames cast deep shadows over Melissa's face.

"It's fine," Zenos replied with a shrug. "Why were you demoted?"

"I must have fallen out of favor with the general," she said. "I kept proposing changes to the structure of the front lines. The general's strategy is to treat the poor like disposable pawns and keep throwing them at the beasts. But that approach will invariably breed dissatisfaction on the front, and that resentment will eventually ignite something much bigger..."

A log in the fire split with a sharp pop.

"So the poor are disposable pawns to him," Zenos mused, gazing into the flames.

"Not just the poor. In the military, every soldier is but a piece on a board. But...we mustn't forget that they're also *people*. That's what my former superior, someone I deeply respected, taught me..."

"I don't think you're wrong."

Melissa pulled her knees close to her chest. "In the military, it doesn't matter whether you are right or wrong. It only matters if your superior *decides* that you're right or wrong." She stared blankly into the glowing red embers. "Until last year, I was stationed at the northern front. There, too, I butted heads with a newly appointed commanding officer sent from the capital."

That officer, desperate for a quick victory to boost his career, had delayed ordering a retreat. As a result, many soldiers under Melissa's command had lost their lives. She'd confronted him about it, and he'd retaliated by pinning the blame for the defeat on her.

As a result, she'd been disgraced and reassigned to the Western Defensive Line.

“And now I’ve repeated the exact same mistake,” Melissa muttered bitterly.

“From where I’m standing,” Zenos began plainly, “you’re the one who should be in charge.”

It had been Melissa’s initial directives that sparked the recent coordination efforts on the front lines. Her former subordinates had simply followed through with her own broader strategy. Indirectly, she’d been the one responsible for their success.

“High praise, coming from you,” she said with a small smile before shaking her head slightly. “But...having breaks in the chain of command will only cause more confusion on the front. And I’m a soldier. I have no choice but to follow orders.”

“I see...”

“But thanks to you, Zenos, the Western Defensive Line has regained its footing. I may no longer be a commander, but I’m still a soldier of this kingdom, and I want to thank you,” she said, raising her right hand to her forehead in a salute.

Zenos scratched his head. “You shouldn’t be thanking me. All I did was heal some people.”

“You wield a sword as well as I do, and you heal injuries flawlessly. I can’t believe someone with your talents was hidden away in our kingdom. Had I the power to do so, I would drag you onto the grand stage myself.”

“Please don’t.”

“So, where should we go from here?”

“What do you mean?”

Melissa’s expression shifted back to that of a soldier. “The Ashen Harvest has a plethora of beast tamers under its command, and the Yanul Marshlands offer an endless supply of beasts. If we want to end this conflict, a breakthrough of some kind will be necessary. What do you think?”

“Well, strategy isn’t exactly my forte. Figuring that out should be your job, no?”

“Yes, but I want your opinion.”

Zenos shrugged and glanced toward the first line of defense. “The way I see it, the quickest way to end things would be to strike

directly at the Ashen Harvest's base."

"You think that would be *quick*? Their base is within beast territory, and we don't even know where exactly. We could be wiped out before we locate it."

"Well, it could be done, but...yeah, considering the effort involved, I'm not a fan of the idea either." Zenos narrowed his eyes at the foggy wetlands in the far distance. "But honestly, I don't think we even need to make the first move. *They* will."

"What?"

"Well, if the Ashen Harvest is in cahoots with the Malavaar Empire, that means their goal is to break through the Western Defensive Line and force the main force on the northern front to divert here, right?"

"That's the most likely scenario. Then, while the northern front is weakened, the empire would launch a full-scale invasion."

"But the western front has stabilized. So the Ashen Harvest must be aware that things aren't going to plan."

Though the Ashen Harvest's beast tamers were controlling the countless magical beasts inhabiting the Yanul Marshlands, the soldiers on the Western Defensive Line now had improved medical support and could return to the front lines quickly, locking this area in a prolonged stalemate. Since the Ashen Harvest's goal had originally been to disrupt the balance on the northern front, getting stuck in a deadlock here as well rendered their entire strategy meaningless.

"So they must be coming up with a new strategy, is what you're saying," Melissa said. "What do you think they'll do?"

"You already know the answer, don't you? If we assume the Ashen Harvest can only attack by using magical beasts, well... Up until now, they've been sending small critters, trying to overwhelm us with sheer numbers. But since that's not working, they'll probably pivot from quantity to quality."

"In other words...medium-sized beasts and above," Melissa concluded.

"Exactly. So we should expand the units responsible for blocking off the smaller beasts' advance while also setting up specialized units

to take down the bigger ones."

Controlling smaller magical beasts was fairly simple, but the mid-to-large ones were a different story. The enemy would be taking a significant risk, and might even potentially lose some of their beast tamers in the process.

"Conversely, if we manage to hold the line, the tide of battle shifts in our favor. It'll be a turning point for both sides."

"Pfft... Aha ha ha ha!"

As Melissa burst into sudden laughter, Zenos gave her a puzzled look. "Wh-What's so funny?"

"Oh, nothing. I was thinking the same thing. I'm just frustrated. If I still had my authority, I'd be recruiting you into the military on the spot."

"Uh, again, please don't. I'm only here because I have to be. I'm no soldier, I promise."

Zenos stood up, rolling his neck slowly. Following his lead, Melissa placed her palms on the ground and pushed to her feet as well.

"So why did you apply to be a border patrol officer?" she asked.

"Well, it's kind of personal. What about you, though? Why did *you* become a soldier?"

"Me? I..." Melissa hesitated for a moment, then turned her gaze toward the border in the distance. "I was born in a frontier village. The empire raided and destroyed it. Becoming a soldier was only natural for me."

Zenos listened in silence.

"I wanted to protect the other villages, so that no one else would lose their whole family like I did. I wanted to protect the good people of our towns and cities. I trained in swordplay day and night, felled countless enemies, and rose through the ranks of the military. Eventually, I became known as the feared Flare Maiden of the north, and found more and more that I wanted to protect. There came a point when I vowed I would protect this entire country."

Melissa closed her eyes in frustration.

"And yet," she continued, "here I am now, a supply officer at the western frontier. How pathetic. It's not even worth crying over."

"I don't see a problem," Zenos said casually.

Melissa's brow furrowed in irritation. "How can you not?! How am I supposed to protect anyone, let alone the entire nation, from this position?!"

"Look, a country is a huge, abstract thing. You can't protect things like that. And people like me, the dregs of society? We don't owe the country anything."

"Zenos, I like you, but I cannot overlook what you're saying. You have all this talent, and you *don't* want to use it for the greater good?"

"I don't have any grand intentions to protect the country. I protect what's important to me: the lives and the livelihoods of the people I can reach. That's all."

Melissa blinked in surprise. "The people you can reach..."

Slowly, she turned over her palm, staring down at it. The years of wielding a sword had stripped her skin raw over and over, giving her rough calluses that looked almost like overlapping scales.

How had it all begun, again?

At first, she'd just wanted to protect her parents. Her little brother. The friends she'd grown up with.


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But somewhere along the way, that desire had expanded from saving those closest to her to her whole village, then all villages, then towns, then cities, then the whole country—a vast, faceless entity.

"I..."

"Oh! There you guys are," came a cheery interruption from the direction of the tent below the hill. Grace, the army healer, waved at them as she approached with several others. "We need to get started on the strategy meeting for tomorrow!"

"You may not be a commander anymore," Zenos said to Melissa, smiling, "but you're still strong enough to protect those you *can* reach, aren't you?"

Melissa stared at him. "Zenos..."

Above them, a single star streaked across the deep-navy sky.

Chapter Five: The Flare Maiden's Resolve

The weather the next day was clear. A gentle breeze blew over the frontier, and the atmosphere was peaceful. The stench of blood was gone, and there were no roars or screams to be heard from the battlefield.

Inside a carriage heading from the fortress to the front lines sat General Higarth, clad in his usual golden armor.

"What is happening? How is it so quiet?" he asked.

"Sir. It seems there have been no attacks from magical beasts since yesterday evening."

At the report, Higarth's belly shook with laughter. "Is that so? Did you hear that, Lord Rubel? The enemy must have sensed my approach and fled in terror!" he boasted, as though trying to impress the young noble sitting across from him.

Rubel's expression showed a hint of displeasure, however. "There are no enemies? Then how am I supposed to prove myself?"

"Ah, well, er..."

"Rubel," interjected Lily, who sat beside the boy. "It's much better that way."

"What are you talking about, Lily? I came here *specifically* to prove myself," he countered, looking slightly tense.

Lily let out a small sigh and gazed out the window. The carriage was headed for an area called the second line of defense. Approaching the front line like that brought with it both worry and anticipation.

She placed a hand on her chest and took a slow, steady breath.

I wonder if Zenos will be there...

***

Near the medical tent at the second line of defense, Melissa spotted Zenos and called out to him.

"Something the matter?" she asked.

"Hmm? Why do you ask?" he replied.

"Well, you've been staring in the direction of the fortress for a while now."

"Oh, it's just... I feel like something familiar is coming."

Melissa tilted her head in confusion for a moment before her expression turned serious. "Well, no matter. What I'm here to discuss is the lack of magical beasts last night. It's the first time since these attacks began that there's been such a long lull."

"Right. Hopefully they've given up."

Zenos knew that was likely not the case. He and Melissa had discussed this last night; odds were that the enemy had moved on to the next phase of their plan.

"Are the troops ready to deal with larger magical beasts?" he asked.

"We've selected the best among them and reviewed battle strategies this morning."

"You're really something, aren't you?"

"Don't flatter me. I'm only a supply officer now. All I did was offer some advice."

Despite Melissa's demotion, the soldiers who had previously served under her still treated her with the same level of respect—proof of the high regard in which they held her.

"I'll go over the formations one more time," she said.

Just as she was about to mount her horse, the irregular chime of a bell echoed through the second line of defense.

"An attack?" Zenos asked, looking toward the first line.

"No," Melissa replied uneasily. "That was a summons from a senior officer."

***

A stout, middle-aged general glared at the soldiers gathered in the plaza-like center of the fortifications making up the second line

of defense. His golden armor seemed to weigh on him as he sunk into a chair, breathing heavily.

"What is the meaning of this?" the general asked.

"What do you mean by that, sir...?" one of the captains present asked hesitantly.

Higarth snorted. "Why are there slum rats in the medical tent?"

"B-Because treating everyone in the same place is more effici—"

"Why are these vermin eating the same food and wearing the same equipment as the soldiers?"

"It's strengthened cooperation and, as a result, repelling the beasts has been—"

"You foooools!" Higarth shouted as he stood back up. He kept glancing at the armored carriage parked deeper within the encampment, as if trying to ensure that whoever was inside would see him. "You are nothing but pawns! What gives you the right to make decisions on your own?! Did *I* ever order you to fight side by side with this filth?!"

"N-No, sir."

"Coddle them, make them think they matter, and then what?! Why, the order within the military—no, the *entire kingdom*—would collapse! Now, listen! These people are nothing! Disposable! Scum must be treated as such!"

Many of the unit captains felt that addressing the immediate threat before them was more important than something as nebulous as the kingdom's order, but the atmosphere did not allow for objections.

Higarth glanced at the carriage once more before raising his right hand and shouting, "*I* am the highest-ranking officer here! If I tell you to run, you run! If I tell you to die, you die! Your only duty is to obey my orders! Have I not made that clear?! Defy me, and..." His sharp gaze landed on Melissa. "...you'll end up demoted, like that woman over there! Do you understand?!"

"Y-Yes, sir!" the captains said in unison, bowing their heads despite their frustration.

Melissa, now reduced to a mere supply officer, had no authority to protest. She simply clenched her fists and observed the situation.

Zenos, along with the other poor, had been moved to another tent in the second line of defense to avoid any complications. The last thing they needed was for Higarth to see him there.

Wiping the sweat from his forehead, the general scowled at the soldiers. "Now, return the frontline formations to their original state immediately! Use the poor as shields! It's a perfect strategy to both thin out the beasts of the marshlands and the vermin of the capital at the same time. Can your simple minds not understand that?! Do it *now*—"

"If I may..."

"Hngh?!" Interrupted mid-speech, Higarth choked on his words and turned to glare in the direction of the voice. "What?!"

Melissa, who'd stepped forward, found herself startled at her own boldness. A mere supply officer had no right to speak here. *So why am I...?*

As Higarth and the captains all stared at her, she hesitated for a moment. But before she could speak, the sharp ringing of a bell echoed across the area.

"Incoming! Incoming!"

The second line of defense had been built at a vantage point that overlooked the bridge at the edge of the first line of defense. From here, a cloud of dust rising high into the air beyond the bridge was clearly visible—a sight they'd seen many times before. But something about this attack seemed different.

"What is that...?"

The sheer volume of dust was abnormal, and within it, a massive figure could be seen, its torso as thick as a giant tree. Its head swayed slowly from side to side, and its pallid scales, tinged with a faint blue, shimmered under the sunlight.

"Oh, you've gotta be kidding me."

"Zenos!"

Somehow, Zenos, who was supposed to be in a tent, had appeared right beside Melissa. The area around them was in turmoil, with soldiers and the poor alike moving frantically at the sound of the alarm. Only Higarth and his entourage stood there, frozen, unsure of what to do.

The massive snakelike creature, glowing a faint blue, slithered forward at a leisurely pace, knocking down the trees and vegetation in its path. The sharp scent of burnt wood filled the air, stinging the inside of everyone's noses.

"A blue salamander, of all things," Zenos grumbled.

"A blue salamander..." Melissa echoed quietly.

During her time as a commander at the Western Defensive Line, Melissa had studied all the magical beasts that roamed this region, but she'd never heard of a blue salamander appearing here before.

"It's an A+ Rank beast that secretes a powerful acid," Zenos explained. "It probably lives deep in the Yanul Marshlands, which is why you've never seen it. The Ashen Harvest is really something if they managed to tame something like that."

Melissa didn't respond. From the hilltop, she could see the massive creature slowly slithering toward the bridge on the first line of defense. The people defending the bridge had their weapons drawn, but their postures were tense—understandably so in the face of a monster of that magnitude. Glancing behind her, she saw that Higarth and his entourage, realizing the severity of the situation, were scrambling to flee.

"You should take command, Melissa," Zenos told her. "We can't win unless people coordinate. You built a specialized unit for powerful enemies for this reason, didn't you?"

"Y-Yes, but I'm just a supply officer..."

The gargantuan monster came to a sudden halt. It lowered its head, bringing it down to just above the ground. Its emotionless blue eyes seemed to be staring straight at the second line of defense atop the hill.

"Oh no. It's coming this way," Zenos warned.

"What?"

Abruptly, the blue salamander coiled its body, then began to slither at an alarming speed toward them. It ignored the first line of defense entirely, plunging directly into the river. Acid seeped from its body as it made contact with the water, causing the liquid to sizzle and evaporate into thick steam. The splashing droplets corroded the nearby bridge's railing, burning through it instantly. Soldiers hurriedly

backed away, trying to avoid the acidic mist.

"E-Eeeeeek! It's coming! It's comiiing!" a panicked Higarth shrieked, retreating in fear—despite being the general supposedly in charge. "H-Hey! You there! Do something!"

The blue salamander crossed the river in an instant. As it advanced toward the second line of defense, it left a charred mess of blackened soil in its wake as its acidic secretions came into contact with the lush green fields it slithered across.

One of the unit captains hastily asked, "General, sir! Your orders?!"

"Bwuh?" Finally remembering that he was supposed to be in command, Higarth nearly bit his tongue before barking out, "P-Protect me!"

"Protect you, sir? What of our defensive formation? What countermeasures should we—"

"Th-That's irrelevant! Just make sure I'm safe! It's you lot's duty to protect those above you!"

"Our duty as soldiers is to protect the kingdo—"

"Shut uuup! Do you want to be demoted too?! Now hurry! Join the slum rats and act as decoys to buy me time to escape!"

"D-Decoys...?" the confused captain stammered.

"This is the military!" Higarth roared. "Your commander tells you to die, you die, remember?! Now, this is an order! Die for me!"

The captain bit his lip, then lowered his head and saluted. "Yes, sir..."

Promptly, the soldiers of the second line of defense began shouting as they ran down the hill in a scattered formation, trying to draw the magical beast's attention away from Higarth.

"You're just gonna let that happen?" Zenos asked Melissa, placing a hand on her shoulder from behind.

"Zenos...!"

"Look, I'm not in the military, and I don't care what happens to the country. But..." The black-clad healer's voice took on a more serious tone. "Those soldiers are my patients now. If you're just gonna stand there and do nothing, I'm just gonna act on my own."

"I..." Melissa trailed off, staring straight at Zenos and recalling his

words from the night before.

"I protect what's important to me: the lives and the livelihoods of the people I can reach."

Melissa looked down at her right hand.

"You may not be a commander anymore, but you're still strong enough to protect those you can *reach, aren't you?"*

"I...!"

Clenching her right hand into a fist, Melissa broke into a sprint.

The soldiers were still running chaotically down the hill to divert the blue salamander's attention away from Higarth—but there was no strategy to their movements. If they kept taking turns acting as bait for the enormous beast, there was no doubt they'd be massacred.

With a low hissing sound, the blue salamander continued its path up the hill.

"Hurry! Be my shields! Die for me!" Higarth shrieked.

"Y-Yes, sir!" shouted a young soldier, his face tense and pale as he stepped directly into the monster's path.

Bolts of acid shot from the blue salamander's fangs like arrows, and the soldier's face twisted in terror. He let out a small yelp, but...the acid never reached him.

Melissa had stepped in front of the soldier, holding a steel shield.

"C-Commander," the soldier stammered as the shield's surface began to sizzle and melt like sludge, sending a puff of white smoke into the air.

"Don't die like this!" she snapped.

Her voice, powerful as a magic loudspeaker, echoed across the second line of defense. The scattered soldiers froze in place, turning to look at her.

"Die only for your country! Don't throw your lives away for nothing! Fight to survive!"

Under the soldiers' stunned gazes, Melissa glanced briefly up the hill—at the man standing there, with his hands on his hips and a faint smile on his face. Zenos gave her a slow nod, and with that, Melissa continued shouting.

"Listen up! Will you follow me, even though I'm no longer your

commander?!”

After a brief silence, the soldiers on the hill responded in unison, “Yes, ma’am!!!”

Melissa touched the hilt of her sword. “Then we’re taking down the blue salamander! With me! Chaaarge!”

“Yes, ma’am!!!”

Something in the soldiers’ eyes changed as resolve returned to their voices. The scattered men quickly formed ranks, transforming into a collective once again.

Under Melissa’s leadership, the second line of defense finally began to function as a true bulwark of the nation.

***

Within a carriage stationed at the rear of the second line of defense, Rubel Baycladd, the third son of one of the prestigious seven noble houses, stared out the window.

“Wh-What is that...?” he asked shakily.

Ahead was a massive bluish-white creature, as large as a giant tree, undulating menacingly.

“Is that...a magical beast...?”

Rubel’s face had gone pale. His hand was clamped around the hilt of his sword, trembling uncontrollably. He’d come here eager to prove his worth, but seeing such a fiendish beast for the first time had left him in shock.

“H-How are we supposed to deal with that...?” he muttered in a daze before turning sharply to the soldiers guarding the carriage. “Hey! Are we safe in here?!”

“My lord! This carriage is reinforced with multiple layers of steel plating, so we should be fine, my lord!”

“O-Oh, okay...”

Next to him, Lily gazed silently out the small window of the armored carriage. It was hard to get a full view of the second line of defense from here, and her detection magic had a limited range, so she couldn’t pinpoint Zenos’s presence—but she was sure he was nearby. She could just feel it.

But stepping outside meant she'd get in the way at best, so she remained still.

Ugh... Even now, I can't see him...

Praying for Zenos's safety, Lily pressed her lips together and kept her eyes on the narrow window.

***

"Damn her! That woman is *finished*! I'll have her court-martialed for this!" Higarth shouted, enraged, between ragged breaths.

He, who was in charge of the Western Defense Corps, had given explicit orders—but Melissa, whom he'd demoted to a measly supply officer, had completely disregarded them and taken command of the battlefield on her own. A blatant act of insubordination.

"I'll make her rue this daaay!"

Even as Higarth bellowed, he continued to prioritize his own safety—he needed to get as far away from the enormous beast as possible. Though he'd meant to retreat to the reinforced carriage, in his initial panic, he'd run in the opposite direction. Glancing behind him, he saw the blue salamander slithering closer, its massive form swaying side to side.

"Eeeeeek! Why is it coming after *meee*?!"

For some reason, the monster seemed to be hunting him specifically. His legs felt heavy. His body felt heavy. His gut felt heavy. His golden armor clanked noisily as he ran, his breath coming out in short wheezes.

"Take off your armor!" came a voice from somewhere.

Higarth looked over to see a black-haired man in a dark cloak shouting at him. "The beast is probably reacting to your golden armor! Take it off, now!"

"Y-You fool! Do you have any idea how valuable this is?! If I take it off, you scum will just pilfer—"

Before he could finish his sentence, a sharp *whoosh* whistled behind him, followed by an unbearable searing pain that tore through his entire body. The blue salamander's acid had struck Higarth from behind.

"Aaaaaargh!"

"Seriously? I told you," Zenos grumbled with an exasperated shrug as he watched Higarth collapse far ahead.

He'd activated a protective spell just before the acid made contact, so he doubted Higarth was dead. But the spell was weaker at this distance, so the general couldn't have escaped unscathed either.

"Oh well. I'll deal with him later. Right now..." Zenos turned his gaze toward the magical beast and dashed forward.

"Rear supports, bring shields to the defense squads! They won't last long! Keep rotating them out!" Melissa commanded.

Under her orders, the army had caught up to the blue salamander and surrounded it.

"Infantry, stab its underbelly with spears! Ranged, aim for its head with arrows and magic!"

"Yes, ma'am!!!"

Through swift coordination, the soldiers gradually chipped away at the A+ Rank magical beast. The infantry moved with remarkable speed, dodging the beast's acid shots while precisely striking its body with spears.

"Huh?"

"My body feels so light!"

"What is this glow...?"

A faint blue shimmer, almost imperceptible, had enveloped the soldiers' bodies.

"Huh...?" Melissa said, furrowing her brows and turning to look at Zenos, who'd rejoined the group at the rear. "This is your doing, isn't it?"

"Yeah. I used enhancement magic on the frontline soldiers."

"Seriously, who *are* you? Didn't you say you're a healer?"

"I am."

"What kind of healer does *that*?" Melissa snapped, exasperated. Still, she gave him a small smile. "But...you have my thanks."

Then, she gripped the hilt of her sword, pulling it slightly out of its scabbard.

"We're almost there! Don't falter!"

“Yes, ma’am!!!” the soldiers responded in unison, working with each other to the best of their abilities.

In response, the blue salamander let out a shrill cry toward the heavens. “Screeeeeeee!”

No matter how much acid it spewed or how violently it lashed out, the soldiers sustained only minor injuries, and even those were healed almost instantly. The magical beast—likely a dominant force in the Yanul Marshlands—now found itself bewildered by these unexpectedly hardy foes.

The army, meanwhile, with Melissa’s command and Zenos’s support, was steadily gaining ground.

Eventually, either due to exhaustion or frustration, the beast’s head lowered close to the ground.

“This is it! Get ready!”

At Melissa’s command, the army split into two groups.

This is my chance, she thought, drawing her sword fully and dashing forward. The weapon’s blade was crimson red, adorned with strange engravings. With each step she took, red flames wrapped around the glowing metal, burning brightly.

“A magic sword,” Zenos murmured as he slowly raised his right hand.

Melissa’s blade was a rare weapon, infused with magical attributes. Zenos recalled that, at the northern front, she’d been known as the Flare Maiden.

“Hssssss!”

Sensing the ominous aura pouring off the approaching Melissa, the blue salamander quickly identified her as a threat and fired a barrage of acidic projectiles at her.

“*Enhance Legs.*”

Thanks to Zenos’s magic, Melissa gained speed, weaving through the volley of acid to close the distance between herself and the beast. She glanced back briefly before kicking off the ground with all her might and leaping toward the blue salamander, her sword raised high.

“Haaaaaaaaaaah!”

Melissa's crimson blade, reflecting the sunlight in a fiery blaze, sent a towering pillar of flames soaring into the sky. In a single, decisive strike, the scorching blow tore through the air with a burst of heat, slicing the massive magical beast's head cleanly down the middle. Flames surged into the open wound, swirling violently as they engulfed the blue salamander's body, burning it to a crisp.

"Eee..."

Letting out a faint cry of agony, the colossal creature collapsed onto the ground with a resounding *thud*. The earth trembled underfoot for a moment, and then silence fell over the second line of defense.

"Did we...do it?"

"We did it..."

"We did it!"

Soldiers, the poor—all those who'd fought to defend against the beast's attack exchanged smiles and congratulations.

"Well done, everyone! Get the wounded to the medical tent, quickly!" Melissa commanded as she sheathed her magic sword. She issued various orders to the soldiers, then turned to Zenos. "You were a huge help, Zenos. It was thanks to your enhancement magic that I could fight beyond my limits."

"I figured I might as well meddle a little," Zenos replied.

"I am, once again, in your debt." Melissa sighed.

"The credit's all yours, though," Zenos pointed out.

Melissa gave him a puzzled look.

"Look, I'm just guessing, but soldiers usually fight other people, right? They don't get to fight magical beasts much. And the blue salamander can regenerate any part of its body, like a lizard with its tail. That's why the usual strategy against it is to deal just enough damage to force it to lower its head, then go for the kill. Which you pulled off perfectly. Nice job."

"Is that how you kill it?"

"Wait, you didn't know?" That had been exactly what she'd done, so Zenos hadn't said anything earlier.

Melissa looked down at the lifeless blue salamander. "Humans, beasts, living creatures in general...they all die if you go for the

heart or the head. With a body that massive, I couldn't guess where that creature's heart was. So I went for the head."

"You're something else, really," Zenos said with a wry smile and a shrug.

Melissa, caught up in the moment, smiled briefly before letting out a small sigh. "But I took command of the army and ignored my general. I'm definitely getting court-martialed."

"Even though it all worked out in the end? That should be all that matters..."

"That's not how the military works."

"Sounds like a pain," Zenos muttered, placing a hand on his hip and sighing.

At that moment, Grace, the Western Defense Corps healer, came running from the medical tent. "Are there any more injured?"

"Hmm? No," Zenos replied. "The worst injuries I healed during the battle, so I don't think there's anyone left..." He trailed off, then suddenly clapped his hands.

"What is it?"

"Wait, I forgot. There *is* someone."

Indeed, there was a certain high-ranking officer with a bulging stomach who'd been pelted with the blue salamander's acid. Zenos looked up the hill to locate him, then glanced at Melissa and smirked slightly.

"Shall we go negotiate with him?"

***

"Ngh... Argh... Ahh..."

A middle-aged military officer clad in golden armor was rolling on a slope in agony. His armor, once magnificent, had been doused in the blue salamander's potent acid and was now half melted, gleaming a dull, sickly yellow.

Higarth clutched at his throat, groaning at the three healers he'd brought with him from the Capital Defense Corps. "H-Hurry...and...help me..."

The healers, hands already raised over him, were sweating

profusely.

"S-Sir, we're casting healing magic at full strength!"

"But the acid is too corrosive..."

"We've got our hands full just stopping its spread..."

"U-Useless wretches... I'll have you all fired!"

The acid from the A+ Rank magical beast was searing Higarth's head, cheeks, and limbs, gradually eating into his flesh. The healers desperately worked at regenerating his skin, but the moment it reformed, the acid would burn it away again. Their magic was running dry, and the burning pain coursing through Higarth only worsened.

"Aaaugh! It's hot! It burns! Why is this happening to meee?!"

As Higarth screamed and sobbed, a calm voice cut through his cries. "Want me to heal you?"

Higarth gasped at the word "heal" and jerked his head toward the voice. Standing nearby was a black-haired man wearing a dark cloak.

"Y-You..."

That man. That insolent rat. Higarth never forgot the faces of those who had been disrespectful to him.

But right now, that didn't matter.

Clawing at the dirt, he said with bloodshot eyes, "C-Can you do it...?"

"I'm a healer, sort of. Not an ordinary one, granted."

"A...slum rat...is a healer...?"

"I mean, if you don't want my help..."

"W-Wait! Wait, I said!" Higarth coughed roughly, clenching his fists. "D-Do it... Heal me!"

"Depends on the price."

"P-Price...?"

"Yeah. I take payment for my services."

"H-How...much...?"

"I won't be charging you money today," Zenos said, glancing behind him. "Instead, I want you to make Melissa the commander of the Western Defense Corps again and transfer full authority to her. And no take backs. You have to swear it."

Melissa's jaw dropped with shock. "Zenos...!"

At some point the soldiers had all formed a circle around the scene.

"Go Zenos," came a hushed cheer from Grace, who stood among the onlookers.

Higarth's face turned beet red as he ground out, "D-Don't be ridiculous. A rat like you dares to interfere with military affai—"

"All righty then. No healing for you."

"Wait! Wait, waaait! Please waaait!" Higarth shouted, his mouth contorted as he clapped his hands together in supplication. "F-Fine! Fine! I...reinstate Melissa Tarque...as commander! And I transfer...full authority...to her..."

Behind the still bewildered Melissa, the soldiers erupted into loud cheers. One of her more prepared men quickly produced a written agreement and had the nearly unconscious Higarth press his thumbprint onto it.

"Good," Zenos said. "Payment collected." He handed the document to Melissa, then slowly approached the cowering Higarth.

The general's personal healers eyed Zenos with skepticism.

"C-Can you actually heal him?" one asked.

"Of course he can!" Grace interjected. "Who do you think he is?"

"Why are *you* responding, Grace...?" Zenos muttered. He turned back to Higarth, smiling awkwardly, and raised his right hand over the general. "*Heal.*"

With the chant, a soft white glow enveloped Higarth's rotund frame. Each particle of light danced as if it had a will of its own, soothing the seared flesh. As they shimmered brightly, the acid's corrosion was rapidly undone, and new skin began to form at an astonishing rate.

"Whoa..."

"Wh-What the..."

The healers, witnessing what to them may as well have been a miracle, stared in stunned disbelief.

Grace, meanwhile, stood there smugly with her arms crossed. "Hah! I told you!"

"No, really, what's up with you?" Zenos asked, scratching his

head. He casually rolled his right shoulder. “Anyway, all done.”

“I-Incredible...”

“I can hardly believe this...”

As the healers stood speechless, Zenos turned to the newly reinstated commander. “Melissa, can you pour some water on him?”

“Of course,” she replied.

At Melissa’s signal, the soldiers brought over buckets of water. She grabbed one and dumped it straight over Higarth’s head.

“Guuuh! Wh-What are you doing?!” Higarth sputtered and shouted.

Zenos casually massaged his shoulder. “Well, the acid on your skin will burn you all over again if it’s not taken care of. Gotta wash it off while the healing spell is still active. Keep going, Melissa.”

“Of course. Anything to save our general. Men, keep pouring!”

“Yes, ma’am!!!”

With that, Melissa and her soldiers, as if exacting a lifelong grudge, relentlessly doused Higarth with bucket after bucket of water.

“Bwuh! Bwaugh!”

“More water! We must be thorough!”

“Yes, ma’am!!!”

“You guys seem to be having fun,” Zenos remarked.

“What are you talking about, Zenos?” Melissa asked. “We are doing our utmost to save our general’s life. Isn’t that right, everyone?”

“Yes, ma’am!!!”

“Ah, how nice to see such a well-regarded man,” Zenos said with a wry smile as he looked down at the thoroughly soaked general.

“Buh... Hurk...” Thinning bangs plastered to his forehead, Higarth ground his teeth in frustration. But a moment later, he realized the searing pain and the burns were completely gone, and his expression changed as he slowly lifted his head. “Y-You... Who in blazes are you?”

“Just a slum rat. A pawn you tried to discard.”

“How can...filth like you...do this?”

“General,” Melissa said, stepping forward. “The poor were

instrumental in this battle, both in defending the western border and saving your life. I hope you do not forget that. I know I won't."

Higarth glared at Melissa, clenching his fists, then let out a groan toward the sky. "Grrrrrrgh!"

Though his wounds were fully healed, his stamina was severely drained. Unable to stand, he was placed on a stretcher by his personal healers and carried back toward the camp.

Melissa gave a formal salute. "Zenos, you have my deepest thanks, once again."

"It's fine. I did this for me too."

"For yourself?"

"Look, sorry to ask so soon, but now that you have command and all, I need a favor. Can you send the two kids at the fortress back to the capital?"

"The kids? You mean Lord Rubel and his friend, the elf girl? I don't mind, but...why?"

"Well, it's a long story..."

"You truly are a mystery of a man. Very well, I won't pry. I'll arrange it as soon as we return to the fortress."

"Appreciate it."

With that, Zenos's work at the Western Defensive Line was complete.

Melissa let out a short chuckle, then moved to stand beside Zenos, gazing over the now peaceful battlefield. "With this, the front is secure."

Zenos contemplated her words in silence.

The salamander attack had likely been orchestrated by the Ashen Harvest, just like the rest, but it must've been a monumental task to control such a large beast. Their beast tamers were bound to be exhausted, and the enemy wouldn't be able to make another move for a while. Plus, if the soldiers transported the blue salamander's carcass to the bridge at the first line of defense, the massive corpse would act as a deterrent and keep other magical beasts away for the time being.

Indeed, the front had stabilized—at least for now.

Melissa lightly brushed her fingers over the hilt of her sword.

"Now we must find the Ashen Harvest's hideout in the marshlands and wipe them out. We also need to uncover their connection to the Malavaar Empire. Once we do those things, this defensive operation will truly be over."

"And you're staring at me because...?" Zenos asked.

"Will you help us?"

"Look, listen, I'm just a healer from the slums."

Melissa laughed. "I kid, I kid. You've already done more than enough for us. The rest is our job."

"Are you *actually* kidding...?"

Zenos shrugged, deciding to take her words at face value. He let out a long breath. Now that things were finally settled, he just wanted to see Lily and confirm that she was safe. However...

"What's wrong, Zenos?" Melissa asked.

"Oh, just..."

Something didn't feel right. Everything should have been dealt with, yet he was strangely uneasy.

"Zenos."

"Yikes!" Zenos yelped at the sudden voice coming from his pack, his back going rigid with surprise.

Melissa tilted her head in confusion.

Zenos took a step back and muttered quietly toward his bag. "Floaty snake, what are y—"

"This is bad. I, of all beings, have made a grave miscalculation," Carmilla said in a lower voice than usual.

"What do you mean?"

"Lily might be in trouble."

"What?" Zenos furrowed his brows.

The next moment, a bell rang from the direction of the second line of defense.

"What's going on, Zeno—"

"Sorry, Melissa. I've gotta go."

Leaving her behind, Zenos enhanced his leg strength with magic and sprinted back toward the camp. He vaulted over the barricade and rushed deeper into the encampment, where he found Higarth, sitting upright on a stretcher with a blank, dazed expression.

“The...carriage,” Higarth mumbled.

The armored carriage Higarth had arrived in was completely destroyed. The horses were nowhere to be seen and the impressive steel plating had been ripped apart, shredded beyond recognition. The torn-up interior was visible even at this distance.

No one was inside.

Nearby, a fallen guard, barely conscious, groaned, “Lord Rubel...has been taken...”

***

On the rooftop of the stone fortress in the Yanul Marshlands that served as the Ashen Harvest’s base of operations, a robed elderly man laughed as he gazed in the direction of the border.

“Heh heh heh... They even managed to repel the blue salamander. Impressive...”

Even for the Ashen Harvest, with numerous beast tamers at their disposal, controlling a massive A+ Rank magical beast was no simple feat. They’d suffered significant casualties, as they’d expected to, and Zuey—the leader of the beast tamers—had sustained severe injuries that had rendered him out of commission for the time being.

With this, the Ashen Harvest’s advance had been halted.

“Or so they must think,” the old man said, the wrinkled corners of his mouth turning up in a smile. He plucked a piece from a board placed on a table before him.

“Chief, what is that?” asked a woman standing behind him.

“A game from this continent called ‘chess.’ It’s quite interesting. Each piece has different rules for movement, and the goal is to overthrow the opponent.” He rubbed a piece against his cheek as he glanced behind him, where two people were kneeling respectfully.

One was a woman wearing what appeared to be human bones like a necklace. The other was a young man with unremarkable features and strangely pale skin.

“Even a game has multiple types of pieces,” the old man continued. “So why would they assume we only have beast tamers at our disposal? Don’t you think it’s odd, Sai? Zen?”

Sai and Zen nodded wordlessly.

"Zuey was only a decoy," the chief said, "while Zen slipped in to eliminate the king." To demonstrate his point, he tossed one piece aside and advanced another deep into the opposing color's territory.

The Ashen Harvest worked as a collective—various units converging into a single living entity. Each individual member was nothing but a piece on a board, raised from youth to be willing to sacrifice everything for the group's objectives.

"Heh heh... Ah, what was the word for this, again? Oh, right..."

The chief's lips curled into a grin.

"Checkmate."

***

A little earlier, Rubel had been inside a carriage stationed behind the second line of defense, his face glued to one of its small windows as he watched the battle against the blue salamander.

"Th-They're winning..."

From here, he couldn't see much of the allied forces' movements, but he could clearly make out the serpent's raised, triangular head. The previously chaotic shouts of the soldiers had begun to unify, and the magical beast seemed to show signs of distress.

"They're doing it!" Rubel exclaimed, grabbing the shoulders of the young elf sitting with him in the carriage. "They're winning, Lily!"

"Yeah!" Lily replied.

"Wait," the boy said in sudden realization. "No, that's bad!"

"What? Why?"

If the soldiers defeated the beast, Rubel would lose the opportunity to prove himself. He'd come all the way to the front lines, sure, but if anyone heard that he'd sat safely inside a carriage while others risked life and limb, he would be a laughingstock.

Rubel stood up. "I'm going."

"Rubel, no! It's dangerous!" Lily said. "The beast is still out there!"

"That's exactly why!" he declared. He couldn't go home without achieving anything, after all.

The man keeping guard, unsurprisingly, shook his head. "You mustn't, Lord Rubel. Please remain in the safety of the carriage."

"I didn't come here just to watch!"

"Be that as it may, we cannot allow you to leave." The guard's tone brokered no argument.

Rubel let out a deep sigh, pressing his fingers to his forehead. "Fine. But staying cooped up in this stuffy carriage is making me feel sick. Surely I can step outside for some fresh air? Or would you rather I collapse from nausea?"

For a moment, the guard hesitated, glancing outside. The massive beast was quite a distance away, so there wouldn't be any immediate danger.

Reluctantly, the guard cracked the carriage's door open slightly. "Very well. But only for a moment, and do not stray from the carriage."

"I know, I know!" Rubel snapped.

He stepped out of the carriage and crouched, stretching his limbs—and then, without warning, he took off running.

"Lord Rubel!" the guard called out, ready to hurry after the young noble. A fistful of dirt flew straight into his face. "Mmph?!"

Rubel, it seemed, had grabbed the dirt when he'd crouched down. He couldn't go back without proving himself; he had to show his father and brothers his worth.

But before he could get anywhere, he came to an abrupt stop. This area should've been empty aside from a few guards now that the soldiers had left to deal with the beasts—and yet a small group of men was striding leisurely through the camp.

"Well, well. Looks like a fancy little lordling was in that fancy little carriage," a man said.

"Great. Now we don't have to haul ass all the way to the fortress," another noted.

"The boss and the chief are gonna be pleased."

The men were clad in simple leather clothing, each equipped with what appeared to be metallic claws—quite evidently not the typical outfits of Herzeth soldiers.

"Wh-Who are you?" Rubel demanded.

"Lord Rubel! Return to the carriage now!" a guard shouted as he and another man moved to shield the boy. "Gah!"

"Gwah!"

With a single swing of his right hand, one of the men sent both the guards flying, blood spraying into the air. These guards were elite soldiers, and yet they hadn't stood a chance—they hadn't even seen the attack coming.

"W-Wah..." Rubel stammered, instinctively turning to flee.

Lily, leaning out of the carriage's door, reached for her friend. "Rubel!"

"Lily!"

Desperately, Rubel grabbed Lily's outstretched hand. She pulled him up, then quickly slammed the carriage door shut behind him.

Panting heavily, Rubel shouted in alarm, "Wh-Who were those guys?!"

"I don't know," Lily said. "Stay here, okay? I'll go call for help!"

"What? No, don't!"

"But the guards are in dan—"

Before Lily could finish her sentence, the carriage began to shake violently. Through the small window, Rubel caught a glimpse of the horses breaking free from their tethers—which appeared to have been cut—and bolting away with terrified neighs.

And then a dull, heavy *bang* echoed right next to him.

"Eek!"

A set of strange glowing metal claws had pierced through the carriage's outer structure.

Faced with the sinister weapon, Rubel fell back onto his rear in shock. "H-How?! This is armored steel!"

"Fooound you," came a singsong voice from outside as a pair of gray eyes peered through the newly torn gash in the steel plating.

The attacker reached into the fissure, forcing it apart with superhuman strength, the steel creaking and groaning as it gave way.

"O heavens, O earth, heed the whispers of the wind... All ye elements of the air..." Lily began to chant as she stood protectively in front of Rubel, her right hand extended outward. "*Gust!*"

A fierce whirlwind spiraled forth, slamming into the lead attacker's stomach.

"Oof," the man grunted. He only staggered back a couple of steps, unfazed, then let out a mocking laugh. "Bah ha ha! What an interesting little girl you are."

"Rubel! Run while I hold them o—"

The side of the man's palm struck Lily's neck, and she collapsed instantly.

"Lily!" Rubel called out.

The men now turned their attention to the young boy, who still sat collapsed near the carriage wall. Though he wanted to run, his legs refused to move.

Desperately trying to drag himself backward, he said, "S-Stay away! Don't you know who I am?!"

"Oh? Are you someone important?"

"I-I'm a noble of House Baycladd, the foremost of Herzeth's seven great noble houses! I-If you lay a single finger on me, you'll regret it!"

The men exchanged looks, then burst into amused laughter.

"That's great news, milord. Good to know you just blabbed like an idiot after all your friends tried so hard to get you to escape."

"Eek! Wait, wai—" Rubel began, the words dying on his lips as a sharp blow struck the back of his neck. His vision blurred, then went dark.

"Hey," another man said. "What do we do with the elf?"

"Bring her. She was with a noble, so she must be worth something as a hostage."

Rubel felt his body being lifted, and the last thing he heard before slipping into unconsciousness was:

"May this victory lead to an even more bountiful harvest."

Chapter Six: Hostage Rescue

"Why would you bring Lord Rubel to the front lines?!"

In the medical tent at the second line of defense, a furious Melissa held Higarth by the collar, shaking the portly general furiously.

"G-Guh! L-Lord Rubel himself demanded it!" Higarth sputtered.

"Damn it!"

Apparently, their foe had more than just beast tamers at their disposal. They'd used the blue salamander as a decoy, creating chaos while a separate unit infiltrated Herzeth territory to capture a key figure. It was likely their initial target had been the general, but they'd ended up stumbling upon someone of even higher standing.

"I was careless," Carmilla lamented. "I sensed Lily's approach, but the overwhelming malice from the blue salamander overwhelmed my perception, and I failed to detect the anomaly in time."

Zenos stood silently near the edge of the tent, arms crossed, listening to the wraith mutter from within his bag.

Lily, who had been with Rubel, was nowhere to be seen—which meant she'd likely been taken as well.

"There's only one thing to do," Zenos finally said.

"Agreed," Carmilla replied.

At the center of the tent, Melissa and the soldiers were tense, their brows furrowed.

"Commander, your orders?"

"We need to rescue the hostages quickly," Melissa replied. "The more time passes, the more outrageous our enemy's demands could become. But we don't know where the Ashen Harvest's hideout is, and deploying a large-scale search would only cause the magical beast attacks to escalate. We need an elite force that can..." Melissa trailed off as she noticed Zenos walking out of the tent. "Wait! Zenos!" She chased after him. "Where are you going?"

“Where else? To get the kids back,” he answered as if it were the most obvious thing in the world.

Melissa looked taken aback. “But we still don’t know where the enemy is hiding!”

“I have a good idea.”

“What? How?”

As he walked through the tall grass, Zenos adjusted his pack over his shoulder. “The Ashen Harvest needs to control a large number of magical beasts. That means their hideout must be in the area of the marshlands with the most beasts.”

“That’s a solid theory, but the issue is finding out where that is.”

“It’ll be somewhere rife with raw mana. Magical beasts tend to favor those places.”

“I mean, yes, but how do we—”

“I can sort of sense it myself, but fortunately, I know someone who’s even better at it.”

“That would be me,” Carmilla said as she emerged from Zenos’s pack.

“A-A wraith?!” Melissa exclaimed in alarm, watching the undead float in the shade. “Wh-Why is a wraith here?!”

“I am not in the mood for unnecessary questions,” Carmilla remarked in a voice cold as ice as Melissa instinctively reached for the blade at her waist. An intense chill radiated outward, instantly freezing the undergrowth. “They have played with fire, and now they shall burn. How dare they take Lily!”

“Lily...?” Melissa echoed, tilting her head slightly. “You mean the elf girl? Zenos, weren’t you worried about her too? Who is she to you?”

“Family,” Zenos replied immediately before turning on his heel. “Let’s go, Carmilla.”

“Of course.”

Carmilla’s form grew faint, then disappeared back into Zenos’s bag. The chill gave way to the scorching summer sun once more, bringing Melissa back to reality.

“Wait, Zenos!” Melissa called out.

“Sorry, Melissa. I need to hurry.”

"I know. I'm going too."

Zenos stopped and looked back at the commander. "Don't you need someone in charge here?"

"The front is already orderly, and with the blue salamander dead, there won't be more magical beast attacks for a while. Rescuing the hostages is our top priority, as it will determine the fate of the Western Defensive Line. Besides..." Melissa's eyes shone with determination. "This is important to you. Let me at least repay some of my debt."

After a pause, Zenos's expression finally softened, and he gave her a small smile. "All right. Thank you."

***

Within the thick blanket of fog enveloping the Yanul Marshlands, pale moonlight revealed the faint silhouette of a stone fortress.

The hideout of the Ashen Harvest was a crude building, but sturdy—well fortified and functional enough to serve as a temporary stronghold. On the top floor of the fortress and within a dimly lit room, two hostages sat inside a cage pressed against the wall.

The cage, which likely had been previously used for magical beasts, reeked of animal musk and decay. Trapped, his knees pulled to his chest, Rubel Baycladd trembled uncontrollably.

"Wh-What now? Th-They're going to kill us..."

Beside him, Lily remained silent, her gaze fixed beyond the bars.

Finally, with a creak, the stone door opened and an old man with a hooked nose and hollow, deep-set eyes entered the room.

"How are you faring?" the man asked in a raspy voice. "I must apologize for offering these paltry accommodations for such distinguished guests."

Despite his apologetic words, the old man showed no trace of emotion or sincerity.

Rubel stared at the man with a fearful expression. "Y-You will regret doing this to me!"

"Oh? And how, exactly, will I come to regret it?"

"H-Help is on the way. And when they arrive, you're all—"

Tilting his head at a right angle, the old man asked in a curious tone, "And how, exactly, will help arrive? They don't know where this fortress is, the fog outside is thick, and the marshlands are teeming with beasts."

"W-Well...!"

"No one is coming, boy." The old man straightened his head and gave them an amused smile.

Rubel turned white as a sheet. "Wh-What are you going to do to us?!"

"Well, let's see... We could boil you, roast you, carve you up raw... Which cooking technique do you prefer, little lordling? We have plenty of hungry magical beasts nearby."

Rubel shuddered violently. "Eek..."

"It'll be okay, Rubel," Lily said calmly. "He's not going to do any of that."

The old man turned his gray eyes toward Lily. "Oh, an elf, is it? And why, pray tell, would you say that, little lady?"

"I can't be sure, but...the beast tamers here were controlling a big magical beast, right? They must be exhausted. You probably don't have lots of ways left to attack. That makes Rubel and me valuable. You have to be careful with us."

"Heh heh heh... You're an interesting one, little lady. So composed for your age! Tell me, who are you? What things have you seen?"

Lily didn't respond, and the old man, unbothered, simply continued, "Well, it doesn't matter. You'll talk sooner or later, like it or not. And unfortunately, your assumption is incorrect."

"Huh?"

"It's a common misconception, but our group doesn't have *only* beast tamers. Our ancestors were nomads who crossed treacherous lands and honed their survival skills. Controlling magical beasts was only one of many arts they developed."

Behind the old man were two figures, likely his subordinates. It was uncertain when they'd appeared.

The old man pointed a weathered finger at a woman wearing a necklace made of linked bones. "This woman, Sai, leads the

necromancer division."

"Necromancers..."

"Controlling magical beasts isn't that different from controlling the dead. When Sai's unit makes its move, the dead will rise and attack the living. And if you value your life...!"

The old man suddenly wrapped his bony fingers around the metal bars of the cage, making Rubel let out a small shriek. Satisfied with the reaction, the man narrowed his eyes before placing a hand on his other subordinate's shoulder.

"And then we have Zen's unit, who have done excellent work today."

"Thank you, chief," Zen said with a small nod. He looked unremarkable and his presence wasn't particularly intimidating—but judging by his simple leather clothing, he was likely part of the group that had attacked the carriage.

"The people who cut through the armor plates like they were made of paper," Lily said. Hoping to glean more information, she asked, "How did they do it?"

"Heh heh... As you can see, we have more pawns at our disposal than just beast tamers," the old man said with a serene smile. "And hostages are just one among our many other tools."

Lily fell silent, and the old man leaned his face closer to the bars.

"So I would suggest you do not entertain any foolish ideas such as escape. You might be met with a horrible, accidental fate. But even if that happens, our necromancers can simply use your bodies instead."

Rubel's eyes welled with tears. "Eek..."

The old man, followed by the other two, turned away and left the room, his staff tapping against the stone floor.

"N-N-Nooo!" Rubel wailed. "They're *really* going to kill us!"

"It's okay," Lily insisted. "They wouldn't have tried to scare us if we were worthless to them. They need us."

"B-But the necromancers can control corpses!"

"I don't think it's that simple. If they turn us into zombies, our appearances would change, and the people from the kingdom would notice. These guys would have a much harder time negotiating. So

for now, we should keep our wits abou—”

“Help! Heeelp, someooone!”

“Calm down!” Lily yelled, slapping Rubel sharply across the cheek.

After a moment of silence, Rubel brought a hand to his face, eyes wide with disbelief. “What?”

Lily took a deep breath, then looked Rubel straight in the eye. “You’re the one who kept demanding to go to the front. But you’re scared of ghosts, you’re scared of magical beasts, and you’re panicking because you were captured. If you’re just gonna be afraid of everything, you should’ve never come here in the first place!”

“H-H-How could you slap me?! I’m from one of the seven great noble houses!”

“We’re friends, aren’t we? Friends are supposed to stop each other from making mistakes!”

Just as Zenos had when he’d stopped his best friend, Velitra, from going too far. And, honestly, Lily should’ve done something much sooner.

“Friends...” Rubel murmured in disbelief at Lily’s serious expression.

Perhaps he’d never had someone treat him as an equal before.

Conflicted, he continued, “Are you...not scared?”

“Of course I am. I’m super scared.”

She’d said earlier that they were valuable as hostages and would be safe for now, but the truth was that she couldn’t be sure. The old man had openly revealed details about his forces, which likely meant he didn’t intend to ever let them go.

Of course, she couldn’t tell Rubel that.

Lowering his hand from his cheek, the noble boy asked another question. “So how are you so calm?”

“I’m not. But hostage negotiations take a while. If we just behave, they won’t do anything until that’s done. It buys us time.”

“And what good does that do?”

“Help is definitely on the way.”

“But that old man said the soldiers don’t even know this place exists.”

“Someone will come.”

“How can you be so sure?”

“He promised.”

Rubel blinked, confused. “What?”

Lily nodded slowly. “Yeah. He said, ‘I will see you home safe. Wait for me.’”

***

Elsewhere in the misty wetlands, two figures raced through the night.

“*Flame Slash!*”

“Gyah!”

A faintly glowing blade ignited the darkness, cutting down three charging magical beasts at once, engulfing their bodies in fire.

“Damn it,” Melissa grunted as she sheathed her sword. “They keep coming.”

The air was filled with the feral growls of magical beasts, interspersed with the rustles of footsteps as they dashed through the marshlands.

Zenos, who ran next to Melissa, nodded. “But the increase in beasts means we’re getting closer to the enemy’s hideout.”

On the other hand, that meant the Ashen Harvest was bound to detect their approach soon. Time was of the essence, and so Zenos had used an enhancement spell on both of them to increase their leg strength.

“Zenos! Incoming!” Melissa warned.

“*Scalpel.*”

“Groooar!” a magical beast roared as it leaped at Zenos from the fog, fangs bared.

With the blade of mana that had formed in his hand, Zenos cut down the beast with ease.

“I really don’t understand,” Melissa said, exasperated. “Are you a healer or a swordsman?”

“I told you, I’m a healer. This is a medical blade. I just made it bigger so I can use it as a sword.”

“Now I understand even less...” the commander muttered,

glancing ahead.

Leading the way was Carmilla, sensing the density of the mana in the air as she guided them through the fog.

"Hmm. This way," she said.

"Zenos," Melissa called out, "could it be that you're...actually a necromancer?"

Zenos bit back a laugh at the comment. "Sure looks like it, huh, Carmilla?"

"Fool!" Carmilla snapped. "No one commands the Lich Queen!"

"M-My apologies," Melissa stammered, bewildered. "I've just...never heard of a wraith rushing to rescue hostages..."

Zenos smiled with a mix of sympathy and understanding. "She's a pretty good sort, despite what it may seem."

"But wraiths *can't* be 'good sorts'..."

***

"Chief."

Inside the Ashen Harvest's hideout, the call of a sentry made the group's elderly leader pause mid-scrawl.

"What?" the chief snapped. "I'm still drafting our demands to Herzeth. Be patient."

"Ah, no, sir. I have something to report."

"If the hostages are making a fuss, feel free to break an arm or two until they stop."

"It's not about the hostages. We believe someone is approaching our base."

The old man set his brush down on the desk and finally turned to face the sentry. "A rescue team?"

"We cannot rule out the possibility."

"Hmph. Large nations remain as foolish as ever. We don't need to do anything. Leave them. They'll be food for the beasts in no time."

The marshlands at night were a death trap. Visibility was poor, and the entire region was crawling with magical beasts. Locating their fortress was nearly impossible, and attempting to was practically suicide.

But the sentry remained tense. “According to our scouts, they’re heading straight toward us somehow.”

Not only were the rescuers navigating the foggy maze as though it were an empty wasteland, but they were cutting through the swarms of magical beasts with ease.

The chief’s brows furrowed slightly. “Impossible. You’re sure they’re human?”

“It’s likely, but...with visibility this low, our scouts couldn’t offer any precise details.”

The elderly man paused for a moment before shifting his hollow gaze toward the darkness. “Sai.”

“Yes, chief?” came a voice from the corner of the room, where a figure stirred.

“I doubt they’ll make it here, but just in case, get your unit ready and move out.”

“As you command.”

The marshlands were filled with the remains of lost travelers and foolish adventurers who had met their end trying to hunt down great magical beasts. There was no shortage of materials for undead thralls.

“We shall feed them to the starving undead,” Sai said with a grin, her bone necklace rattling softly as she disappeared into the darkness.

Even if their foe managed to get close, the undead would sense the presence of the living and devour them—or perhaps leave them half dead and drag them back to the fortress. Torturing these would-be rescuers in front of the captives would make them sink into even deeper terror and despair, making them easier to control.

The old man nodded, satisfied, and picked up his brush once more to turn back to his writing.

“War is a festival to the Ashen Harvest,” he mused. “We must enjoy it to the fullest.”

***

Meanwhile, elsewhere in the Yanul Marshlands, Carmilla licked

her fingertip and held it up.

"Hmm... This way," she said. "'Tis close by."

"Is that really how you're supposed to check for mana density?" Zenos asked. That seemed to him more like something one did to check the direction of the wind.

"It adds to the atmosphere," Carmilla retorted with an eerie chuckle.

"The atmosphere," Zenos echoed incredulously.

"'Tis human nature to add levity to situations such as this."

"I don't know if you can claim to have *human* nature."

"Fool! Of course I am human! I am simply...a slightly translucent, floating one."

"Normal humans aren't translucent."

"Th-This is insane," Melissa muttered, still completely baffled by the apex undead. "I've never seen a wraith behave like this..."

Carmilla folded her arms smugly as she looked down at the commander. "There is more to the world than battlefields. You have seen nothing yet. A lack of capacity for accepting the unknown will leave you ill prepared to handle unforeseen situations."

"Y-You're right... I think..."

The wraith chuckled. "Consider yourself honored to have the guidance of one who was once called the greatest sage in all of the continent. How fortunate you are."

"You were once the greatest sage in all of the continent?!" Melissa asked, startled. "Truly?!"

"No."

"How can you lie so blatantly?!"

"Hrm." Carmilla brought a finger to her lips as Melissa struggled to process her confusion. "Quiet. Something approaches."

Melissa immediately began to survey their surroundings. Indeed, something was approaching from beyond the night fog.

"A beast?" she asked.

"No," Carmilla replied, shaking her head.

The sounds echoing in their eardrums weren't the feral growls of the beasts from before—they were deeper, like tortured moans welling up from the depths of the earth itself.

As the group neared the heart of the marshlands, a sudden gust of wind cut through the air, scattering the fog that had obscured their vision.

"Wh-What the...?!" Melissa shouted, alarmed by the sight before her.

Under the pale moonlight, countless figures shuffled—and not a single one of them showed any trace of life. Their arms were stretched forward, hands dangling limply from the wrists. Empty sockets were where eyes should've been, and their exposed gums dripped with drool and mucus. The creatures dragged their feet, bodies tilted at an unnatural angle, as they moved to surround the group.

"U-Undead?" Melissa stammered. "How? The marshlands are a breeding ground for magical beasts, not for undead!" She quickly drew her sword from its sheath, gripping it tightly.

The night seemed darker now, as though they'd wandered into the realm beyond.

Realization struck Melissa then. "Of course," she ground out between gritted teeth. "The Ashen Harvest is made up of more than just beast tamers!"

There had to be necromancers among them. Melissa glanced worriedly at her companions—only to see Zenos and the wraith standing there, completely unfazed.

"Hmm..." Zenos hummed.

"I thought as much," Carmilla said.

"H-Hello? How are you two so calm? There's an insane number of them! And unlike magical beasts, undead don't feel pain and get back up as soon as you cut them down! This is bad! Really bad!"

Zenos remained unbothered. "You're right. They're not like magical beasts, thankfully. This will be much easier."

"What...?"

The healer stepped forward, raising both hands. Radiant white light swirled around his fingertips, rapidly growing in intensity.

"*Mega Heal.*"

With the chant, healing light surged forward like a tidal wave, swallowing the undead in its radiance. A warm breeze followed,

gently stirring the grass and trees.

"Groooar!"

The sacred flood cleansed every unholy being in its path, guiding them toward the afterlife. When the brilliant storm passed, not even a single bone remained. Before the group lay only the marshlands, devoid of any trace of the undead.

"What the..." Melissa mumbled dumbly. "Wh-Wh-What just happened?!"

"I keep telling you I'm a healer," Zenos said, his expression deadpan.

The pieces seemed to finally click together for Melissa. "R-Right. The undead are weak to healing magic..."

Still, there was a limit to how much damage it could do. Melissa had already suspected Zenos's magic wasn't normal, especially after watching him treat Higarth's severe acid burns, but this was beyond anything she could've ever imagined.

"You absolute idiot!" came the wraith's voice, clearly displeased. "Do not carelessly unleash a healing spell of that magnitude! Are you *trying* to exorcise me?!"

"Oh. Right," Zenos muttered. "My bad."

"'My bad'? *'My bad'?!* Is that all you have to say after nearly killing me?! I would not have rested in peace at all!"

"You're already dead, though."

"Th-This really is the strangest..." Melissa mumbled, trailing off as she watched the absurd exchange between human and wraith.

"Zenos!" Carmilla called out. "More are coming!"

In the distance, now that the mist had cleared, they could see countless distorted figures shuffling toward them. It was likely that the Ashen Harvest's necromancers were summoning even more undead.

"Good. That's perfect," Zenos said, casually rolling his shoulders as he began walking toward them.

"What's perfect about this?" Melissa asked.

"Well, if they're coming from over there, then that must be the direction of their hideout."

"I-I suppose so, but are you all right? That last spell must've

drained you."

"I'm totally fine."

"O-Oh, I see..."

Carmilla chuckled as she floated past the healer, taking the vanguard. "Step aside, Zenos. *I* shall handle the rest."

"You?" he asked.

"I do not meddle in the affairs of the living, as you know, but these are not the living. And besides, the Ashen Harvest dared to put Lily through such a frightening experience. I must not let a debt go unpaid."

Carmilla grinned wickedly.

"Hee hee hee... Those clever little necromancers think *they* can control the undead? 'Tis high time the Lich Queen taught them a lesson."

***

In the Ashen Harvest's hideout, trapped behind the metal bars of a cage and surrounded by rough stone walls, Rubel sat with Lily.

"You said someone promised you that he'd come help," the boy said, leaning against the wall. "And you're sure he's coming?"

"Yeah. He's coming," Lily replied.

"But how do you know that?"

"Zenos has never broken an important promise with me. So I won't cry. Crying would mean I don't believe he's coming to save me."

Rubel stared at Lily with disbelief. "I don't get it. Why do you trust this guy? You just live with him, right? How can you trust him when not even blood relatives can be trusted?"

This time it was Lily who stared at Rubel in silence.

"Wh-What?"

"I never got to ask, but... Rubel, are you not close with your family?"

"What does 'being close' even mean?" Rubel asked with a scoff. "House Baycladd is at the top of noble society. We're known as schemers. That means you never know what anyone in our family is

really thinking."

Each of the seven great noble houses had a label associated with them based on their individual characteristics and roles. Members of House Fennel were known as moderates, whereas members of House Baycladd were known as schemers.

"Nobles can be difficult. The only thing expected of a Baycladd is being skilled at handling and controlling other nobles. My brothers are good at that. I'm not. To my father, I'm nothing but an extra. I have no real place among the family right now."

"Right. You don't really come across like a schemer. You're really easy to read..."

"Wh-What's that supposed to mean?"

Rubel explained that even when he tried to bond with children his age, they treated him with caution, watching their words around him.

"Is that why you came to a battlefield?" Lily asked.

"I figured if I saved the country in a crisis, my father and brothers would have no choice but to acknowledge my worth," Rubel said proudly.

Lily gave him an exasperated look. "That was stupid of you."

"H-How come?! I've studied swordsmanship! My instructor even said I had talent!"

Which had been, Lily figured, a result of the instructor fawning over a high-ranking noble child. After all, for nobles, swordsmanship was a pastime, not something to stake one's life on.

"And what did you think a lone child like you was going to accomplish on a battlefield?" Lily asked.

"Y-You say that like I've done something wrong!"

"You did. Everyone got dragged into this because of your dumb, childish idea."

Rubel's original intention might have been to help save the country from a crisis, but now that he'd become a hostage, he'd actually made the crisis worse.

"Urk..."

"Look, all I was doing was shopping for groceries. Now I'm a hostage too. This is your fault, Rubel. You need to take

responsibility!”

“Y-You didn’t have to say it like that,” Rubel mumbled. He pouted, his eyes welling with tears.

“Are you mad at me?”

“Y-Yeah, I am! Nobody’s ever spoken to me like that!”

“Really? That’s good to know.”

“Huh?”

Lily smiled. “You’re back to your usual self a little.”

Rubel stared at her with his mouth half agape, his cheeks turning a faint shade of pink.

“What’s wrong?” Lily asked.

“N-Nothing!” he snapped, turning his face away.

Just then, what seemed to be a shrill scream echoed from somewhere. The two children exchanged worried glances.

“Wh-What was that?”

“I-I don’t know, but it sounded like a scream...”

Another high-pitched cry echoed through the air, louder than before, and not the same voice. Numerous shouts began to rise from all directions, mixed with countless groans.

Suddenly, the door to the room burst open violently, and standing there was the old man who seemed to be the Ashen Harvest’s leader.

He glared at the hostages and asked in a low voice, “What is that?”

“What is what?” Lily and Rubel asked in unison, tilting their heads.

The old man’s voice grew more menacing. “What have you two brought into this place?”

Raw screams continued to filter in, louder now through the open door.

“We’re under attack! It’s a horde of undead!” someone shouted.

“Bring fire!” another yelled.

“Necromancers, get it together! These are your thralls! Tell them to stop!”

“W-We can’t! They’re out of control!”

The old man slammed the door to the prison shut with a loud

bang, cutting off the chaotic shouts.

He looked down at the hostages before continuing. “We didn’t detect a large rescue force. That means a very small group has somehow overridden our control over a vast number of undead and turned them against us. So tell me, how exactly is the kingdom doing this? Who’s fighting for them?”

“Could it be...?” Lily whispered, quiet enough that only Rubel could hear.

The old man tossed a key to a pale-faced man behind him. “Zen. Take the hostages away as a precaution.”

“Yes, chief,” the man replied.

“We can’t have these brats running around. Break their legs.”

“As you command.”

The expressionless Zen used the key to unlock the cage. He pushed the metallic cage door open with a creak and slowly stepped inside.

“L-Lily...!” Rubel called out, his face pale as he glanced anxiously at the young elf beside him.

But Lily didn’t resist. She simply kept her head down and muttered, “I... I guess I can’t do this, after all...”

“Can’t do this?” Rubel echoed, confused. “Hey! Get it together, Lily!”

“I promised I wouldn’t cry, but the tears are coming anyway...”

“H-Hey! Lily...”

Rubel panicked as Lily’s tears fell freely down her face. Zen approached the pair, cracking his knuckles.

“So, who wants their legs broken first?”

“Ngh...” Rubel grunted, desperately trying to get his legs to stop trembling.

Lily gently placed a hand on his shoulder. “It’s okay, Rubel.”

“It’s not okay! You’re crying!”

“Yes, but not because I’m scared.”

“Huh...?”

A circular crack formed in the stone wall of the room. The next moment, the wall burst open with a thunderous boom, sending chunks of rock flying outward and revealing a waning moon beyond

the gaping hole.

Standing before the opening was a man wearing a jet-black cloak that seemed to blend into the night.

"Sorry I'm late," he said. "I'm here to see you home, like I promised."

Lily wiped at her cheeks before flashing a beaming smile.

"I've been waiting, Zenos!"


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Chapter Seven: A Lesson in Pain

"It's a horde of undeeeaaad!"

"Why is this happening?!"

"Ruuun!"

The headquarters of the Ashen Harvest were in disarray. Countless zombies and ghouls swarmed the stone fortress, leaving a trail of destruction in their wake.

Leading them was a single apex undead.

"Hee hee hee... You deserve no less for opposing me! Sally forth, my minions!"

The control over the undead had shifted from the necromancers of the Ashen Harvest to a far greater entity: a wraith.

"A wraith?" a woman with human bones wrapped around her neck muttered in astonishment as she stared at Carmilla floating ahead. "Why is a wraith here?!"

Among the ten necromancers around the woman, one shouted, "Lady Sai! The wraith is coming!"

"I-I know! Don't falter!" Sai commanded. "If our entire unit manages to control the wraith, we can turn the tide!"

"Yes, ma'am!" the necromancers replied. They all began to form hand signs in sync, chanting rapidly, "O lost soul, heed our command. Recall your longing for life. We offer you a fragment of existence in a deal of everlasting darkne—"

Carmilla spun like a top and plunged headfirst into their formation, shouting, "Out of my waaaaaaay!!!"

"Gyaaaaaaaah!"

The necromancers convulsed and collapsed, foaming at the mouth under the sheer oppressive force of death.

"Now, dance!" Carmilla declared. "Well, as long as it stays dark, that is."

The wraith landed on the rooftop, then lifted both hands like a

conductor leading an orchestra.

"Groooooooooar!" the undead roared in response, surging forward with even greater ferocity as they attacked their enemies.

Through the hole in the wall of the prison on the top floor, the old man silently observed the unfolding scene.

"Misery warned us that an 'outlandish' individual existed in this country," he muttered. "And here we have someone striding into monster-infested marshlands, forcibly seizing control of a horde of undead. An absurd foe indeed. Life is full of surprises..."

He turned his sunken eyes toward Zenos.

"A necromancer capable of controlling a wraith. How did our scouts miss this? Who exactly are you?"

"I'm no necromancer," Zenos replied. "That wraith is acting on her own to help rescue the hostages."

"Bah ha ha! A wraith, rescuing hostages? What fascinating jokes people tell in this land."

"Joke?" Zenos scratched his head. "Well, I mean, I guess it's kind of funny..."

The old man let out a raspy laugh.

"Chief," asked a pale-faced man as he approached to hand what seemed to be a key to the old man. "What are your orders?"

Just moments ago, the pale-faced man had been inside the cage with the hostages, but now he seemed to be prioritizing his master's safety. His presence was so subtle as to be almost imperceptible—he was, evidently, no ordinary person.

The old man shrugged. "Our people are a disgrace, panicking at something as inconsequential as an attack from a group of undead. They know only how to be the attackers, not the attacked." His voice took on a sadistic tone. "I will have to train them anew."

He raised his voice.

"Sileeence!"

The shout, incredibly powerful for someone so frail and skeletal, echoed throughout the fortress. The panicked members of the Ashen Harvest all gulped loudly, turning their gazes toward the elder standing on the top floor. Even the undead seemed to hesitate, their movements slowing warily.

“I did not train you to be pathetic, disorganized buffoons!” the chief bellowed. “The undead have numbers, but no coordination! Split them into groups and take them down one by one!”

The others, now silent, nodded as the old man’s gaze swept over them.

“Besides, dawn approaches. The undead will be powerless then, and without them, our attackers are few. We have the advantage! The plan remains the same! Eliminate the intruders and use the hostages to pressure the kingdom!”

“Yes, chief!”

The Ashen Harvest members, recovered from the earlier chaos, suddenly snapped back into formation.

It was true that Zenos and Melissa had taken longer than anticipated to reach the fortress, slowed down by the numerous monsters they’d had to cut down while navigating the fog. The night sky above was beginning to lighten, and the moon had grown blurry.

“Oh?” Carmilla muttered from her perch on the rooftop. “Recovering from all that chaos in such a short amount of time is remarkable indeed.” She cast her gaze over the foggy horizon, where traces of the coming dawn were beginning to emerge. “I shall have the zombies rampage until morning breaks, but that is the extent of my ability. The rest is up to you, Zenos.”

“Thanks, Carmilla,” Zenos said under his breath, almost as though he’d heard her.

Zenos and Melissa were just below the roof, facing the old man and his pale-faced lackey. Further back, inside the prison, were Lily and Rubel.

“We’re coming, chief!” came a voice from below, where more members of the Ashen Harvest were trying to make their way upward.

“Hee hee,” Carmilla chuckled, swinging her arms. “You lot are staying right there.”

At her command, the undead charged at the would-be reinforcements, dragging them into a chaotic melee. A temporary reprieve—they wouldn’t be held off much longer.

The old man narrowed his eyes and spoke in a soothing tone, as

though talking to a child. “How unfortunate that dawn is near. Your prized undead will be useless in the light of day.”

“I told you, I’m not a necromancer,” Zenos mumbled.

“Now, how to handle this...” The chief licked his index finger and turned to the pale-faced man behind him. “It’s your unit’s turn, Zen.”

“Yes, chief,” Zen replied, stepping forward with an eerie slowness. His nearly nonexistent presence, with no trace of spirit or will, only made him all the more unsettling.

Zenos cast a brief glance at the enemy, then behind him at the cage. Lily’s gaze locked with his for a moment, and he gave her a slow nod. The hostages didn’t seem to be in immediate danger, and it might be safer for them to remain inside the cage until things settled down.

“Melissa...”

The commander of the Western Defense Corps kept her gaze ahead as she replied, “I’ll handle him. Let me repay at least some of what I owe you.”

Zenos was silent for a moment, then said, “All right. I’ll leave you to it.”

Not even a second later, the pale-faced man—Zen—kicked off the floor. *Fast*. In a fraction of an instant, he closed the distance to Melissa and swung with his right fist, which was equipped with sharp metallic claws.

Melissa managed to block the attack with the sheath of her sword. Sparks flew through the air as she was sent hurtling backward and slammed hard against the wall.

“What strength,” she muttered.

She got back up immediately, but Zen was already upon her, his face remaining expressionless as he raised his right hand for another strike. The claws came slashing diagonally downward, and Melissa rolled sideways to evade. They struck the wall instead, embedding deep into the stone.

Zen’s arm was trapped—now he couldn’t move as freely.

Seizing the opportunity, Melissa sprang to her feet and she drew her sword. The runes engraved on its blade glowed a fiery red as flames erupted along the length of the steel.

“A magic sword, is it? How unusual,” the elderly chief said with a hint of amusement, despite the danger Zen was in. “But not as unusual as what’s about to happen to you.”

The next moment, Zen, who should have been trapped against the wall, effortlessly swung his right arm. The stone tore apart as though it were made of paper, crumbling down in coarse chunks.

Melissa’s eyes widened in shock, but she had no time to hesitate. “*Flame Slash!*”

A surge of crimson fire spiraled toward Zen, but he simply used one leg to propel himself into the air, easily clearing the flames. In midair, he twisted his body into a forward flip, then dove straight toward Melissa.

She did not back down.

“Got you!” she said, charging forward.

Melissa swung her blazing sword in a powerful upward slash. With Zen airborne, the flames would surely engulf him—he had nowhere to escape.

He *should* have had nowhere to escape.

“Tch!”

Zen kicked powerfully off the ceiling, shattering it on impact and revealing the predawn sky above. He propelled himself downward, swinging his claws; the sheer force of the air he displaced cleared a path through the flames, leaving Melissa exposed.

“Damn!”

Instinctively, Melissa used her left hand to grab her sword’s empty sheath to shield herself from the blow. A sharp crack echoed, and three deep fissures spread across the surface of the sheath before it split cleanly in half. A deep vertical gash formed in the stone floor underneath them.

With a single swing, Zen had torn through her flames and sheath, and gouged through solid stone.

“How can this guy be so strong?” Melissa murmured. She tossed aside her destroyed sheath and steadied her breathing.

Watching their battle, Zenos crossed his arms. “Is this enhancement magic...?”

No, that couldn’t be it. Something felt off—he could sense no

magic coming from Zen. Was the man just exceptionally skilled at concealing it?

The elderly chief let out a mocking laugh. "Zen commands a unit of enhanced warriors. Among them, he's the closest to perfect. That woman is sturdier than she looks to be if she's able to withstand his attacks."

"A near-perfect warrior," Zenos muttered, tilting his head.

With a low chuckle, the old man turned to the healer. "Are you not going to help your friend?"

"I want to, but she said to leave this to her. My priority is to rescue the hostages. Can I convince you to give me the key to that cage there?"

"Aha ha ha! You're a strange man. And if I refuse?"

"Then I'll have to take it by force. Or break the cage open, I guess."

The old man hunched over with raspy laughter that gradually grew louder.

"What?"

"I'd like to see you try," the old man said, swiftly raising his staff.

Just before the tip of the staff could hit Zenos's skull, he jumped backward. It struck the stone floor with a deafening boom, sending cracks sprawling outward like a spider's web.

How is he so strong?

Despite the old man's frail frame, his strike had been powerful enough to cause the floor to groan under the force. It began to crumble beneath Zenos's feet, and before he could jump back up, the old man struck a second time, pulling the healer into a midair scuffle as the two plummeted to the floor below.

"Zenooos!" Lily shouted from above.

"Wait a little longer!" Zenos called out. "I'll come to fetch you after I deal with him!"

"Okay!"

Fortunately, the room with the cage had remained intact.

"Zenos!" Melissa called out from a pile of rubble. "Are you all right?!"

She and Zen had seemingly also dropped to the lower level,

though the debris obscured them from view. Her breathing sounded ragged, indicating that her battle was still ongoing.

"I'm good," he replied.

"I'll come to your aid soon!" Melissa said.

"I'm fine. Focus on your thing."

Melissa let out a laugh. "You never needed my help in the first place, I see. We'll regroup later."

"Gotcha."

After the brief exchange, the old man approached Zenos while gripping his staff.

"Aha ha ha... You can't regroup if you're dead. Zen, hurry and finish her."

"Yes, chief," Zen's voice echoed from the other side of the rubble.

With the pile of broken stone between them, the battlefield had split into two sides: Zenos and the chief on one side, and Melissa and Zen on the other.

The old man approached with quiet, measured steps, a small smile plastered on his face. "You're quick for a necromancer, dodging my surprise attack like that."

"How many times do I have to say I'm *not* a necromancer?" Zenos grumbled.

Still, the healer had to admit he'd underestimated the chief of the Ashen Harvest, assuming the frail man had been weak because of his age. And now pale morning light was beginning to filter in from the cracks in the walls, with thin rays draping over the room.

"Morning already," the healer said.

With the sunlight, the undead had vanished, and the screams and battle cries had calmed. Carmilla had likely retreated to safety, so Zenos wasn't worried about her, but this did mean he couldn't count on the undead for support anymore.

Zenos rolled his neck slightly. "So, first that guy, now you. What's going on here? You guys aren't using enhancement magic, are you?"

"That guy? Oh, you mean Zen. Well, since you're about to die anyway, I suppose it doesn't hurt to tell you," the chief said. "It's an ancient, secret art passed down in our tribe."

"A secret art, huh..." So that meant it was a form of enhancement

distinct from conventional magic.

"Zen and I are quite different, though."

"How so?"

"He's a near-perfect warrior. I'm—"

"Chief!" came a multitude of shouts as a group of men rushed toward them.

The undead assault had incapacitated most of the Ashen Harvest's forces, and the five or six warriors that remained were rushing to assist their leader.

"Elite warriors from Zen's unit," the chief explained. "Though they're imperfect compared to him, they should be more than enough to take down one necromancer."

"Do you not have ears? I'm not a necroma— You know what? Whatever."

There was no point in trying to explain anymore. Right now, Zenos's priority was dealing with the immediate threat.

"Charge!" the warriors shouted in unison as they lunged at him.

Activating his enhancement magic, Zenos boosted his agility and, quickly stepping forward, drove his elbows into the torsos of the two nearest enemies. But...

"Diiie!"

"Whoa!"

Even though the force of the impact should've left the men writhing in agony, they seemed largely unbothered. Their expressions didn't change as they countered with their claws—the movements not only shockingly fast but also tightly coordinated. Despite the injuries they'd sustained against the undead, their physical prowess remained unaffected.

That had to be because of the secret art the old man had mentioned earlier.

"What a pain," Zenos muttered. With his enhanced speed, he managed to break out of the men's reach.

And as soon as he did, he was met by a small figure—the elderly chief.

"I didn't finish my sentence earlier," the old man said, matching Zenos's movement effortlessly as the healer instinctively jumped to

the side. “These ones are imperfect. Zen is almost perfect. And I...”

Thwack!

A devastating blow exploded against Zenos’s abdomen, launching his body backward. He crashed through three stone walls and rolled across the cold floor before finally coming to a stop.

“...I am perfect,” the chief declared, as triumphant as a man announcing a victory. His voice echoed through the crumbling fortress.

“Damn, that spooked me,” Zenos mumbled, standing up as though nothing had happened.

The old man’s eyes widened with shock. “That should’ve killed you. What’s the meaning of this?”

“I’m the one who should be asking that.”

Zenos had used basic protective magic, but the chief and his men didn’t seem to be using any sort of spell that would justify their superhuman abilities. The old man had said something about imperfect, near-perfect, and perfect warriors, and mentioned a secret art—but its true nature remained unclear.

“You lot, stop this man!” the chief commanded. “I’ll go secure the hostages upstairs.”

“Yes, chief!”

The imperfect warriors lunged at Zenos again. Even as the healer used enhancement magic to dodge and deliver hefty counterattacks, the men barely flinched, at most grimacing for a split second before resuming their assault.

Something’s not right...

It seemed the men weren’t reacting to pain at all, which would’ve suggested protective magic—but the thing was, they *were* getting injured. Many of them were still bleeding from the injuries they’d sustained against the undead, and some even had visibly broken arms. Yet somehow they didn’t hesitate or slow down at all.

“Wait...”

Zenos kicked off the ground to put distance between himself and the warriors before shouting to the chief, “Hey! Make them stop this! They’re gonna die at this rate!”

“What are you babbling about?” The old man, halfway through

climbing the rubble toward the top floor, turned back with a sneer. "You're the one who's going to die."

Keeping an eye on the warriors around him, Zenos continued, "I know what your secret art is doing."

The words made the old man stop his climb.

"You're messing with their nervous systems, preventing them from feeling pain."

Normally, when damaged, the body would send signals to the brain through the nervous system, and these signals would register as pain. By cutting off that pathway, one could become significantly less sensitive to injury and be able to unleash the full potential of their muscle strength that would've otherwise been suppressed.

The result was a warrior with high physical capabilities who did not fear pain.

Most likely the distinction the old man had made between imperfect, near-perfect, and perfect had to do with the degree to which their pain receptors had been disabled.

"Hah," the elder breathed in what almost sounded like approval. He moved to detach the tip of his staff, revealing a long, thin needle inside. "Clever, aren't you? You're right. This needle is stabbed into the base of the neck to block unnecessary nerve pathways."

That seemed an incredibly risky procedure, but the old man spoke as though it were nothing.

"Of course, many die, and many more are left paralyzed. Those failures are disposed of. Only the ones who survive the process can become true warriors."

"That may improve their physical abilities, but it doesn't prevent injury," Zenos pointed out as he dodged another wave of the warriors' attacks.

If anything, being unable to feel pain made the men *more* vulnerable, not less. Wounds would go unnoticed, and unchecked bleeding could lead to death.

"And? All that matters is that the Ashen Harvest prospers. Individual lives are meaningless. These men are disposable tools and nothing more. And now that you know our secret art, you're not walking out of here alive." He turned to the warriors. "Men! Stop him

with your lives, if you must!”

“Yes, chief!”

The men, bleeding from their limbs, charged forward once more to attack with their broken arms.

“Disposable lives, he says...” Zenos sighed and raised both hands. “*High Heal!*”

A warm light radiated from his palms, instantly flooding the area with a dazzling white glow. Bathed in the brilliance, the warriors instinctively stopped moving, bringing their hands up to shield their eyes.

As the radiance finally settled, they looked down at their own bodies in confusion.

“We’re...healed?”

The bleeding had stopped, and their twisted arms had seamlessly been put back together.

Furrowing his brow, the chief glared at Zenos. “What did you do?”

“Healing magic,” Zenos replied. “I’m a healer.”

“A healer. You used healing magic.” The old man looked at his now recovered warriors, his expression flickering briefly with bewilderment before twisting into a scornful sneer. “Aha ha ha! Are you daft? Why are you helping your enemies? Did you think this act of generosity would make us grateful enough to return the hostages to you? Your arrogance is truly astounding.”

“No, I wasn’t trying to help you at all, actually.”

“Men! Kill him!”

“Yes, chief!” the warriors responded, lunging at Zenos yet again now that their vitality was restored.

“*Enhance Strength*.”

Blue energy enveloped Zenos’s fists, and he launched a series of rapid strikes against the oncoming warriors.

And...

“Aaaaaaaaugh!”

“It huuuuurts!”

“Gaaaaaaaah!”

The warriors were sent flying. One after another, they hit the ground—and rolled around in pure agony.

"Wh-What...?" the chief muttered, baffled.

Zenos rolled his shoulders casually. "I went ahead and restored their severed nerve pathways too. They can feel pain just fine now."

That had been the true purpose behind his use of healing magic. These warriors, who for a long time had been unable to experience real pain due to their chief's secret art, were now faced with raw, unfiltered agony for the first time in years. None of them could so much as stand.

"By the way, gramps," Zenos said, "I healed your nerves too."

"You did *what*?!"

A look of horror spread across the elderly man's face as he hastily turned to flee. Now that the effects of his secret art had faded, his movements had already begun to grow sluggish—but still, he desperately scrambled up the rubble, shouting toward the other half of the battlefield.

"Zen! What are you doing?! Finish it already and get over here!"

"Sorry, but that guy's not getting up again either," came a woman's voice as she stepped into view from beyond the rubble.

"Melissa!" Zenos said.

The red-haired swordswoman, covered in fresh wounds, flashed him a confident grin. "Sorry to keep you waiting, Zenos."

Since Melissa had been out of Zenos's line of sight behind the debris, he hadn't been able to offer her any support. But, despite that, she'd managed to take down the so-called near-perfect warrior, Zen.

"You're good," Zenos commented.

"No, it took me far too long to neutralize him. I need to train more."

"Damn these useless wretches!" the chief spat in frustration.

He pulled a black sphere from his robes and threw it in a sluggish arc across the room. The moment it hit the ground, it burst into a thick cloud of smoke that engulfed the surrounding area.

Taking advantage of it, the chief quickly resumed climbing up the rubble, clawing his way up toward the hostages.

"Wait!"

Zenos and Melissa brushed away the smoke and gave chase, only

to find the old man already inserting a key into the hostages' cage. He tumbled inside, thrusting the needle in his staff at the hostages.

"Aha ha ha... That was close, but I made it," he said. Panting heavily, the chief slowly advanced on Rubel and Lily, who were both pressed against the wall. "Mere children cannot best me."

"Hey, gramps," Zenos called out as he moved to enter the cage.

"Don't come any closer if you care about these brats!" the old man barked.

"Shouldn't you be more worried about your injured men than the hostages?"

"Useless failures serve no purpose to me! Pain exists to be inflicted, not felt! Now, unless you want me to kill these brats, step aside!" The chief's voice took on a sadistic streak as he kept his needle trained on the children. "But having two of them will make it difficult for me to escape. One of them has to die." He turned to the hostages. "Choose."

Rubel and Lily exchanged glances. Just as Lily was about to open her mouth, Rubel spoke first.

"M-Me! If you have to stab someone, stab me!" he shouted.

"Oh...?" the elder said.

"Rubel..." Lily murmured.

Looking between Lily and the old man, Rubel continued, "L-Lily was right. I'm a useless braggart. I acted tough, but when there was real danger, all I did was scream like a coward. It took her knocking some sense into me for me to realize that." Rubel stepped forward defiantly despite the tears in his eyes. "Lily is strong. She never screamed. She never gave up! She never stopped believing that help would come!"

He turned to Lily with a small smile.

"Let me be the brave one, just this once. I'm a proud son of House Baycladd. I will protect my friend! I won't bow to scum like you!"

"Well said, kid," Zenos said, stepping into the cage.

Panicking, the old man lunged forward. "I warned you!"

Clang!

The tip of the needle came to a harmless halt on the surface of

Rubel's chest, where it should've pierced his heart.

"What?!" the chief exclaimed, bewildered.

"H-How...?" Rubel muttered in astonishment, timidly glancing over at Zenos.

"It's protective magic," Zenos explained. "Don't worry. I won't let anyone hurt a friend of Lily's."

"Protective magic?" the chief echoed. "You control a wraith, you fight toe-to-toe with enhanced warriors, you use healing magic, and now you're telling me you can use defensive magic too?!" He pointed a trembling finger at the healer. "You! You're the source of all this! Everything is your fault! Who the hell are you?!"

"I'm just a plain ol' healer, here to take back my family."

The old man's jaw dropped with utter disbelief. "What? Family? Y-You mean you're not part of an elite force?! You came here for these brats? You destroyed the Ashen Harvest for *this*?!"

"Yep."

"Unbelievable... *Unbelievable!* My ambitions, undone for something so trivial!"

"You see lives as disposable. You wouldn't get it." Swirling blue light began to gather around Zenos's right fist. "I have one last lesson for you," he said, approaching slowly as he drew his arm back. "Pain sucks, right? No one likes it. I know I don't. So we try to avoid it, and we want to heal from it as soon as possible. But pain also teaches us to sympathize with the suffering of others."

"The suffering...of others..." Rubel murmured, bringing a hand to his cheek.

"W-Wait," the chief pleaded. "I'll pay you! Name your pri—"

Before the old man could finish, Zenos delivered a full-force cross punch to his face, shouting, "Here's your lesson!"

"Gyaaaaaaaaaaaaaah!"

Now able to feel pain again, the elderly chief was sent flying, smashing through the stone wall. He vanished into the foggy Yanul Marshlands under the morning light.

Dusting off his hands, Zenos stared out into the thick mist.

"*That's* what pain is," he muttered.


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With the battle over, Lily ran over to Rubel.

"Rubel! Are you okay?"

"Um, I... Yeah..." Rubel stammered, rubbing the spot on his chest where the needle had stopped. His face was pale, and his body trembled uncontrollably. "I-I was sure I was dead... You must've been really scared too, Lily..."

"Ah, actually, I..." Lily trailed off awkwardly.

"What?"

"I... Well, I knew Zenos could use protective magic, so honestly, I wasn't that scared."

Rubel's knees gave out, and he slid to the floor with a thud. "A-Are you serious right now...?"

Lily beamed at the noble boy. "But thank you. It meant a lot to me that you protected me."

"Lily..." Rubel mumbled, his cheeks turning a bright shade of red as he hastily turned away. "I-I mean, that wasn't a big deal or anything..." The boy's gaze landed on Zenos. "You really did come save her, though. Meanwhile, I..."

As he watched Rubel's shoulders slump, Zenos scratched his head. "Well, I did come here for Lily, but someone asked me to bring you back too. Your brother, actually. Albert Baycladd."

Rubel sprung to his feet as if struck by something. "M-My brother did...?!"

"He asked me to take care of you, yeah. You can tell him I'll be charging an arm and a leg between the service and hazard pay, so he can look forward to the bill."

"My...brother..."

Rubel stood there in a daze, gazing at the morning sky. A few moments later, tears began to roll down his cheeks.

Whether Albert had wanted to protect Rubel or the Baycladd line was uncertain, but there was no need to tell the boy that. It was something Rubel would have to find out for himself in the future.

From Zenos's pack, a familiar voice rose. "Hee hee... And that, as

they say, is that."

"Why do *you* get to wrap things up, again?"

Epilogue I

The attempted invasion by the Ashen Harvest, the mercenary group from the western continent, had been completely thwarted. Finally, the battle to defend the border was over, and the temporary recruits were set to be sent home.

"Thanks, man. You really helped us out."

"Aw, come on. What're friends for?"

"Right? Let's meet again sometime, yeah?"

All over camp, the poor and the army soldiers were reluctantly saying their goodbyes, and a sense of camaraderie filled the air.

One particular conversation, however, seemed to have the opposite atmosphere.

"L-Lord Rubel!" Higarth stammered, straightening his back anxiously. "It gladdens me to see you safe!"

Rubel stared coldly at the general. "I'm only here thanks to Zenos, Melissa, Lily, the guards who risked their lives to protect me, and the soldiers who held the front line. *You* did nothing."

"I-I... My lord..."

"But my abduction was largely my own responsibility, so I won't hold you accountable for that."

"H-Ha ha..."

"But," Rubel continued, "Higarth, I have clearly seen how your self-serving leadership only caused chaos on the front lines. My father and brothers *will* hear of this."

"E-Eep..."

"House Baycladd will soon send an official report to House Giesz. You should assume you won't be keeping your current position. Behave yourself and await your judgment."

Faced with Rubel's drastic change in demeanor, all Higarth could do was let out a despondent sigh and lower his head in resignation.

Elsewhere, Zenos was surrounded by a group of soldiers.

"Thank you, Dr. Zenos. Truly."

"I owe you my life. I won't forget this."

"Thanks to you, my newborn still has a father."

"It's no big deal," Zenos said. "You all take care."

As he waved and tried to get away from the group, Grace tugged on the hem of his coat. "Zenos, are you leaving already? You could stay a little longer. It's usually really peaceful out here."

"I have people waiting for me in the capital."

"Aw, that's too bad... But we're both healers, so maybe we'll meet again someday."

"Yeah, someday."

Zenos bid his farewell to Grace with a smile.

The last person to approach him was Melissa. "We only triumphed thanks to you. You have my deepest gratitude."

"I only came here to get my family back."

Melissa gave him a small smile before her expression turned serious. "Now all that remains is to determine the connection between the Malavaar Empire and the Ashen Harvest. We'll keep investigating, but uncovering the truth won't be easy."

"Oh?"

The leader of the Ashen Harvest had been found unconscious in the marshlands and brought into military custody, but he'd aged dramatically in that short period of time and was reportedly unable to hold a coherent conversation now. And, of course, the Malavaar Empire would never admit to having colluded with the mercenaries.

"Well, no matter," Melissa said. "Once I return to the northern front, I'll put an end to the empire's ambitions myself."

"You're going back?" Zenos blurted out.

Melissa gave a small, pleased nod. "Yes. We've successfully defended the border and rescued the hostages, and so Lord Rubel has promised to grant my request to return north."

"I see. If that's what you want, then I'm happy for you."

"There's still paperwork to handle, so I'll be at the Western Defensive Line a while longer. Come visit anytime."

"I probably won't. It's pretty far from where I live," Zenos answered truthfully.

Melissa grew quite flustered. “What? D-Does that mean I won’t ever see you again? S-Surely that can’t be true...”

“You can always find me in the capital. I live in the ruined city, so feel free to stop by if you’re ever in the area. Just know I charge for healing.”

“A-Ah, is that so? Very well, then.” Melissa let out a small sigh of relief, then roughly wiped her right hand on her clothes. “Zenos...might I ask you for a handshake before you go?”

“Sure.”

Zenos took Melissa’s outstretched hand and shook it. It was firm and calloused, as a warrior’s hand should be.

“You know, I used to think I was bearing the weight of the entire nation on my shoulders. Something that immense and intangible felt like an impossible burden. But now...I want to focus on protecting those I can reach.”

“Yeah,” Zenos replied simply, offering her a smile and a nod.

Melissa’s expression shifted into a complex mix of tears and happiness, and she abruptly raised her hand to her forehead in a salute. “With this, our mission is complete. You did well, soldier.”

As Zenos and Lily began making their way toward a carriage waiting at the bottom of the hill that was bound for the royal capital, Rubel came sprinting after them at full speed.

“Lily!” he called out.

“Rubel!”

Rubel pressed a hand to his chest, catching his breath before speaking. “D-Do you want to ride in my carriage on the way back? It’s not a military one this time. It’s a nice, luxurious, comfortable one! We could stop by the town of Darma on the way, enjoy the harvest festivities, then switch to a magical vehi—”

An innocent smile spread across Lily’s lips as Rubel rambled on, and she gently interrupted him. “Thank you for inviting me, but I’m going back with Zenos.”

“Huh...?” Rubel nearly collapsed to his knees right then and there, but managed to get a hold of himself and straighten his back. “I-I see... Right, yeah... B-But, we’ll hang out again, right...?”

“Of course! We’re friends, right?”

“F-Friends. Y-You’re right. We’re friends.” Rubel’s expression seemed to flicker between joy and sorrow. “Wh-When can we meet again?”

“Umm... Zenos said he’ll be visiting the Baycladd estate sometime to collect his payment, so maybe then?”

“Okay, so when he collects payment. Okay, yeah, I’ll be waiting!”

“I feel like something’s weird about this conversation,” Zenos muttered.

The two children simply smiled and shook hands, then waved at each other.

“See you, Lily!”

“Yeah, see you, Rubel!”

Beyond Rubel, Melissa was waving as well. “See you, Zenos!”

“Yeah. See you.”

Those who had once come together at the western edge of the country now scattered, each returning to where they belonged.

From Zenos’s backpack, a whisper rose. “Hee hee hee... Ah, to be young...”

The wind swept over the grasslands, now free of the stench of blood.

Epilogue II

At the heart of the Kingdom of the Sun was the royal palace—where entry was permitted to only a select few. Within the castle grounds, an alabaster tower stretched tall toward the heavens. At its peak was a glass-domed chamber, reinforced with a special barrier.

Inside the chamber sat a girl with flowing pink hair that cascaded down to her waist. Her pale, almost translucent skin was reminiscent of fresh snow on an early winter morning, while the soft pink of her eyes harkened to spring flowers in full bloom. Winter and spring, cold and warmth—the girl exuded a mysterious charm that seamlessly mixed these opposites.

Lounging languidly in a leather chair, idly swinging her bare feet, she stared at the sky, muttering to herself.

“The ominous star looms over us still...”

Side Story: The Night Before Departure

On a night when the moon was veiled by thin clouds, a farewell party was being held for Commander Melissa Tarque at the fortress that served as the headquarters for the Western Defensive Line.

"Commaaanderrr!" wailed Grace, a field healer, as she clung to Melissa. "Don't gooo!"

"Oh, don't get so close," Melissa protested. "You reek of alcohol."

"Of course I dooo. You're leaving tomorrooow," Grace whined, her face and eyes bright red. "I gotta drink my sorrows away!"

"You're always drinking, Grace," Melissa said with a wry smile.

Perhaps Rubel Baycladd had kept his word and conveyed her request to his prestigious family—an order had been issued for Melissa's reassignment to the northern front far sooner than expected.

"Well, my work here *is* done," she mused.

With the threat of the Ashen Harvest gone, the Western Defensive Line had returned to its former idyllic state. The only disturbances were, as before, occasional stray magical beasts. The soldiers were back to enjoying their peaceful routines.

But Grace still clung reluctantly to Melissa's arm. "We still have work to do! Growing vegetables in the courtyard, holding sports tournaments, and cooking competitions!"

"I'm glad to know the stakes are low once more," Melissa commented, truly meaning it.

She hadn't always felt that way. There had been a time when she'd believed she belonged on the battlefield, trading blows while in the throes of bloodlust. Back then, she'd only ever felt alive when striking down the foes she'd borne such strong hatred for. That was why, at first, her reassignment to the Western Defensive Line had

been a bitter disappointment. And, while the sudden outbreak of magical beasts had been an unwelcome crisis, she had to admit there had been a certain thrill in it.

But the reality of the situation had been worse than she'd imagined. She'd butted heads with her superior officer and been demoted for it, and the prospect of defending the border had seemed utterly hopeless.

"And then that man came in and changed everything," she mused.

"Zenos..." Grace murmured.

Zenos—the mysterious man who'd rushed in like a gust of wind and left just as quickly.

"We never got to find out who he was," Grace lamented. "I asked some old healer acquaintances, but nobody seems to know him."

"He called himself a shadow healer," Melissa pointed out.

As a poor man, Zenos wouldn't have had an official license. It was likely he didn't have proper records, and so not even the government was likely to be aware of his existence.

"Honestly, I wanted to bring him to the northern front with me," Melissa admitted. She felt that Zenos's talents were wasting away, buried in the chaos of the slums.

Grace leaned in even closer. "That's not fair, commander! I want him to teach me healing magic! Let's recruit him as a consultant for the medical units!"

"No, his abilities are better suited for the battlefield. He should be a frontline commander."

"Consultant!"

"Commander!"

They glared at each other for a moment before both of them laughed it off.

"Not that he'd want either thing," Melissa remarked.

"You're right..."

Zenos had no desire for status, medals, or formal titles. He preferred to remain unknown, helping people where he pleased. Though Grace and Melissa's time with him had been short, they both knew that much, at least.

Grace sighed, propping her chin on her hand. “He’s a strange one. It almost feels like it was all a dream.”

“Almost, but...it wasn’t.”

Melissa still vividly recalled their clash—the weight of his blade, his unwavering gaze, his casual smile. The words he’d offered her when she’d been drowning in despair after her sudden demotion still rang clear in her mind.

“You’re still strong enough to protect those you can *reach, aren’t you?”*

She clenched her fist, holding it out in front of her.

“It kind of feels like we both just got our hearts broken, doesn’t it?” Grace said with a small smile.

“What do you mean?” Melissa asked. She’d never thought about it that way, but...maybe...just maybe... “Hah... Ha ha ha!”

The mere fact that such a concept had found its way into her life of combat had struck her as so absurd that she couldn’t help but burst into hearty laughter.

Melissa grabbed a glass and said, “Tonight we drown our sorrows in drink, then. To heartbreak!”

Grace grinned and raised a bottle of wine. “That’s the spirit!”

Afterword

Hello! I'm Sakaku Hishikawa.

Thank you for picking up a copy of the seventh volume of *The Brilliant Healer's New Life in the Shadows*!

I'm thrilled to announce that the anime adaptation for this series is scheduled to air on TV in April 2025!

Initially, I was totally overwhelmed with joy and disbelief. But as the process moved forward (behind the scenes), I realized just how many people are involved in making an anime and how much goes into making it all come together. Now I'm past that initial shock and excitement, I'm just deeply grateful for this priceless experience.

At this point, all I can do as the author is offer guidance, and mentally throw ten thousand punches every day (look up the reference if you don't get it!). In the meantime, the official anime's website and X account have been launched, so please check them out! A webtoon adaptation featuring an original storyline is in the works too, so stay tuned for updates on that as well!

On a completely unrelated note, I recently traveled abroad for the first time in a while and was reminded of how much my English skills have deteriorated. But at the same time, I was once again struck by how vast the world is! This series has an English version, so maybe I should aim to be able to read it fluently someday.

Now then, on to the acknowledgments.

Once again, I'd like to thank everyone involved in the editorial department of GA Novel, my editors especially, for their hard work publishing this book.

Thank you to Daburyu-sensei, the illustrator! I have nothing but absolute trust in your character designs at this point; I don't even need to give you instructions, really. I can't wait to see more of your work!

Thank you to Ten Junnoichi-sensei, the artist behind the manga

adaptation! Your work brings characters to life even more, and it's always a blast to see!

My gratitude extends to everyone working on the *Brilliant Healer* anime as well: the director, writers, studio staff, distributors, the voice actors who have delivered amazing performances, the sound director, music composers for the soundtrack and theme song alike, the GA rights team... Honestly, there are so many people, I couldn't possibly list them all. Thank you, truly.

I'm a bit shy, so I don't always respond, but I'd like to express my sincere appreciation for all the feedback I get on the web version too.

And most of all, my thanks to you, the readers, who continue to support this series. Thank you, from the bottom of my heart!

Until we meet again!

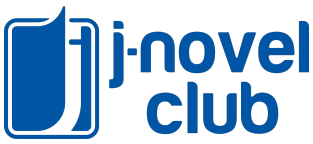

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7
The
Brilliant Healer's
New Life in the Shadows


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Daburyu


“Wait, what?
Battle? H-Hold on!
What?! Wait!”
“Now, onward! To battle!
I’ll show you my mettle,
Lily!”
Rubel
Lily
© Daburyu


Carmilla
“Now, dance!
Well, as long as it
stays dark, that is.”
© Daburyu


Melissa's crimson blade, reflecting the sunlight in a fiery blaze, sent a towering pillar of flames soaring into the sky.
Melissa
© Daburyu
"HAAAAAAAAAAAH!"
Zenos



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